DAVID MARANISS INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

David Maraniss
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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

David Maraniss interview, take one. Marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

David Maraniss

Author and Journalist, *The Washington Post*

Obama's birth in the context of the Civil Rights Movement

01:00:14:00

DAVID MARANISS:

The day that Barack Obama was born, August 4th, 1961, was right at the heart of the early Civil Rights Movement. And on that very day, the Freedom Riders were taking a bus down to Shreveport, Alabama, and many of them were arrested for waiting in the room for whites only that very day. And it just has that sort of enormous significance of all those decades later, a boy born that

day of a white mother and a Black—and an African father would become president of the United States.

Being born biracial in Hawaii

01:00:54:22

DAVID MARANISS:

Stanley Ann Dunham was a free spirit, an independent young woman. She came out of Kansas; both of her parents were from Kansas, but—but her father had already moved the family twi—or several times from Kansas to Seattle and then finally even further west to Hawaii. So the reaction was a little different in Hawaii than it would have been in so many other places. There were still dozens of states in the United States where miscegenation was illegal then. Intermarriage was not allowed in many states, and so in a lot of places it would have been—he would have been born a crime as Trevor Noah later wrote about being born in South Africa. But in Hawaii it was different. There were so many different nationalities in Hawaii at that time that it was a little less of a- of a traumatic experience, a reaction to it there. It was probably, in some ways, the easiest place for someone like Barack Obama to be born.

Obama's early ambitions

01:02:01:12

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, it would be misleading to say that Barack Obama had great ambition as a young boy. It is true that when he was in elementary school in

Indonesia, he did write that he wanted to be president someday. His mother, Ann Dunham, inculcated to him a belief that he could be anything he wanted to be. But really unlike, for instance, Bill Clinton who truly did think he was going to be president someday from probably age five, Barack Obama didn't have—show any of that political ambition as a young man, aside from that one point. He was more relaxed, easy going, very smart, but not a orig—concerned student. He didn't apply himself as well as his mother wanted him to and he showed no interest in student council in high school or even until he got to college. So, in many ways he evolved into that ambitious person, but you didn't really—you don't see it in his earliest years.

Barack Obama Sr.

01:03:09:09

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack Obama was a Luo, a tribe in– from Western Kenya. He was brilliant and troubled, and those sort of two facts played out in his- in his tragic life. He didn't—he was killed in a traffic accident at age 42. But he was part of the rising African movement in Kenya in the late 1950's led by Tom Mboya, who was an international figure and really the leader of the Luo tribe and of sort of bringing Kenya into the modern world in many ways, and Tom Mboya was very popular in the United States and started a movement to bring the first wave of Kenyans to be educated in the US. Barack Obama, the father, was part of that movement. And that's how he ended up in Hawaii. He was with the first wave of Kenyans brought to the United States to be educated. He chose the University of Hawaii because he'd read an article in the Saturday

Evening Post that talked about how multicultural Hawaii was. It was just a fluke that he saw that article and that's how he ended up there.

Obama contemplating his identity

01:04:31:16

DAVID MARANISS:

Really, the question, "Who am I?" was the central question of young Barack or Barry Obama as he called—as he was called in his early days, struggled with. Imagine being born to an African and a white woman in Hawaii where there weren't many—there were a lot of different nationalities, you know, Portuguese Americans and Haw—and Haw—native Hawaiians and Japanese Hawaiians, but not many African American Hawaiians. He didn't have, really, a community to identify with in that sense at an early age. He grew up largely with his white grandparents. His mother was very—traveled to Indonesia much of the time and left the young Barack back—Barry back in Hawaii with his grandparents and so, "who am I?" He had a—for several years he had an Indonesian stepfather. He ne—didn't see his father, only once in his entire life. There weren't many African Americans to identify with, and really that struggle trying to find a sense of identity, which I call a sense of home really, took him through all of his early—his adolescence, really into his early 20's before he started to find himself.

Obama's father

01:05:53:17

DAVID MARANISS:

Barry Obama was a young man, 12 years old at the time. His father decided he would come back to Hawaii. He really wanted to try to reunite perhaps with Ann, his former wife. He had been very troubled at that point and lost a job and was traveling around the world trying to find himself, and he stayed in the same apartment building as Barry and his mother and grandparents at that point. And for a week or more interacted with his father, the first time. His father gave him a basketball. He was—he knew that Barry loved basketball but he—they really had a hard time identifying with each other and it was—it was pretty traumatic for young Obama to be with his father during that period. He took him to Punahou school and the father sort of spoke about Africa. Barry would later say he was a little bit embarrassed by that, and really embarrassed about much about his father because he didn't really know him. So I would say it was at best an awkward reunification and it had—it haunted Obama for the rest of his life.

Obama's stepfather

01:07:17:06

DAVID MARANISS:

Ann Dunham was an internationalist. She- she loved the whole world. And so it was not surprising that first she would marry an African. She was independent minded in that way, and then she met an Indonesian student at the University of Hawaii, Lolo Soetoro, and married him. She had a fascination with Indonesia. One of her leading professors in Anthropology at the University of Hawaii had studied Indonesia, and so she married him. And even as independent as she was, that was still an era where women tended to

follow their husbands. Lolo Soetoro was in Hawaii at a time the year of living dangerously happened in Indonesia when—when there was a repression of a lot of leftists in Indonesia and all of the foreign students who had gone places were called back home. So Lolo went back home to Indonesia and brought his new American wife called a bule, a stranger by Indonesians back to Jakarta and with them, her young son. His—Lolo's stepson, Barry Obama, who for a brief period took the name Barry Soetoro, to be with that family. In some ways, the same things went wrong with Ann's marriage to Lolo that went wrong with Barack Obama, the father. Lolo was an alcoholic. Young Barry Obama dealt with that in so many parts of his life. Lolo was sort of old school sexist and Ann was very independent. It was just—it wasn't meant to last because she had—she was a feminist, an early feminist, and– and dealing with a traditional Indonesian man who thought that a woman's place was in the home was not going to work for that family. So it was not from what I could tell a harsh separation, but a gradual one because they were growing apart so much.

Abandonment

01:09:32:11

DAVID MARANISS:

I think that there was an inner anger inside young Barry Obama because he was constantly being left. He was left by his father before he really was conscious; his father was gone back to first to Harvard and then to—back to Kenya. And then at a fairly early age, his mother decided that she wanted to stay in Indonesia, but didn't want him to go to school there beyond a—the

first earliest years so send him back to Hawaii to live with his grandparents, so in that sense it wasn't quite a sense of abandonment by his mother but an emptiness that he—he wasn't part of an entire family, and I think that that really helped define him. Not entirely in a negative way. It forced him to mature at a fairly early age and to be introspective and think about some of the larger philosophical questions of life when most kids—you know, he still was just a kid who loved to play basketball and later to smoke dope and hangout with his buddies, but he had this introspective side to him that came from this feeling of– of constantly being felt and that constant search for home.

Influence on Obama's early identity in Indonesia

01:10:53:16

DAVID MARANISS:

Well, first of all, when he got to Indonesia he had different color of skin than many Indonesians, but not all and so a lot of his young classmates but not all, and so a lot of his young classmates thought he was from the Island of Ambon, far out in an extended island of Indonesia where—where the people there were darker skinned. His mother would teach him books about Martin Luther King and about the Civil Rights Movement and so he's always interested in that. At one point he read a Life Magazine article about race and *Black Like Me* that really affected his thinking in a way of—whoa, that's my skin. You know, he hadn't really thought about it in that way before. He—he'd felt a little bit apart but never really thought about him as someone different then most people before that.

Ann Dunham's influence on Obama's views

01:11:47:13

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack's mother wanted him to have sort of a positive, optimistic, idealist perspective on the world, which was pretty much hers. And so she—you know, she was constantly teaching him about the noble aspects of civil rights and of race, and she didn't want her son to think ill of his Black father, his African father. So she would tell him—she would create a myth about who he was and his goodness and—and it wasn't really until much later that Barack started to understand the realities of his own family and of his father. Her actions were done out of good intentions but in the end, they started—they were one of the factors that made the son, Barack, feel that his mother was somewhat naïve.

Barack Obama Sr.'s final years

01:12:46:05

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack Obama, the father, had a sort of tumultuous career in Nairobi. At times he was fairly high up in the finance department and at other times he lost his jobs. It depended on who was in and out of favor. And his last years were—were difficult. He'd been let go from a few jobs. His alcoholism was taking hold of him. He was injured in several car crashes. And, as a matter of fact, some of his friends called him "Mr. Toad," from *The Wind in the Willows*. The toad who was always getting in car accidents and a wild driver. And it

was sort of–– many of his friends thought it was predestined that he would die in a traffic accident. His son Barack Obama was at Columbia at that point in college, had only met his father once. Had started just then to reach out to try to find his Kenyan family again and then got a call from a relative from Kenya on a scratchy phone telling him that his father was gone, a father that he never really knew.

Obama's grandfather

01:13:59:05

DAVID MARANISS:

Stanley Dunham, Barack's grandfather from Kansas, from El Dorado, Kansas, was a character straight out of a Midwestern novel. He was a dreamer; he was almost Walter Mittyish in his aspirations and his inability to—to meet them. He thought he was gonna be a John Steinbeck, a writer, at one point and claimed he'd written all these books or—or essays when he was out in California. And at some point a relative opened the trunk of his car where he said it all was and there was nothing there. That's kind of the way he was. He was a storyteller, a BSer, not an evil man in any way, and he was searching for something. That's why he kept traveling from Kansas to Texas to Seattle to Hawaii, looking for some better life. Once his daughter had a son, who was a hapa, half Black and half white as they called it in Hawaii, he sort of embraced it in an interesting way. He—he loved young Barry. Sometimes he'd brag that his grandson was the descendant of a Hawaiian king because Barry looked sort of Hawaiian in his skin color; he also would talk about how he was the Spencer Tracy character in Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, you

know, when his daughter came home with an African husband. But he also tried to, in his own way, introduce young Barry to the few Blacks in Honolulu. Stan knew some of them and was––he'd take him to a bar where there's some African American soldiers hanging out and others. And so, you know, in his own sort of inept way, he was trying to do the best for his—his grandson.

Obama's grandmother

01:1606:14

DAVID MARANISS:

Madeline Payne Dunham, his grandmother, was a contradiction in a sense. She was– she was not an overtly loving woman. She didn't hug her grandson. But she was the responsible one in the family who carried the burden of making sure that everything worked. Her husband, Stanley, was a salesman and never really bringing in much money either as a furniture salesman or insurance. She was very smart. She never graduated from college, but she rose up in the world of banking and, you know, ahead of her time in that sense, and so she was bringing in the money. She was holding the family together, and it really didn't come out until I interviewed President Obama decades later that he acknowledged that she was an alcoholic during that period. A quiet alcoholic, but in the—in the interior of that family in their apartment near Punahou in Honolulu she showed that and only Barry and a few others saw it. He always knew that he owed a lot to his grandmother, who really raised him as much as anyone and was responsible in that sense, but he also saw the interior of the dysfunction of that family.

Interviewing Obama

01:17:39:11

DAVID MARANISS:

I knew I'd only have one shot at talking to him, and I wanted to try to break the ice in some way to make him relax. Ahead of time, I had given him a copy of the introduction, which wrote about what I'd found, where I traveled, the places where I saw his memoir diverging from what I discovered. So he knew to that degree what I had done. I don't do that very often, but I wanted him to know that part. But when I walked into the oval office, one thing I knew was that he was a jock and he liked sports and so did I. He was a Bears fan because he'd spent so much time in Chicago, and I was a Packers fan. And the year before that, the Packers played the Bears in the NFC championship game to see who would go to the Super Bowl and President Obama said, "If the Bears win, I'm gonna go to the Super Bowl." Well, the Packers won and a great Packer player, Charles Woodson, after that game stood up on a table in their dressing room and said, "President Obama says he won't go see us in the Super Bowl, but that's ok because we're gonna go see him in the White House," meaning they were gonna win. So when I walked into the oval office, I said, "Charles Woodson got here before me, but I'm finally glad I made it." And he said, "Man, those Packers were rough on me." And I said, "Of course, you're a Bears fan." And he said, "Yeah, but every time I go to Wisconsin," which he would do a lot because it was a swing state, "they'd give me another share of Packers stock." So then I said, "Yeah but those stocks are worthless and of course they'll give them to any politician." Anyway, that sort of—that eased the way for a conversation along with the fact that I gave him the

introduction. The other thing the introduction did was it mentioned that I'd found his girlfriends before he married Michelle, including the one who kept a diary. So he—of course he wanted to know more about that and that helped extend the interview because he wanted to get to a discussion of how I found her and how she was and how the other girlfriends were. I honestly felt that I knew more about his family than he did, but that's not—that's not in any way to—to self-aggrandizing. What I mean is that all of us know the mythology of our families, but we don't—we've never—you don't have a biographer going back to look up whether it's real or not, and so in that sense he had passed along the myths about his family. For instance, that his Indonesian grandfather—step grandfather had died heroically fighting the Dutch in the war for independence in—in Indonesia and in fact when I got to Indonesia, I discovered that the step grandfather had died falling off the ottoman changing the drapes in his dining room, you know, but that mythology had been passed along. Things like that. In terms of his girlfriends, I'm sure he knows tons more than I do about them because I– I didn't live through that period, but I had certain—he didn't know about Genevieve's diary, for instance.

Complexity of race in family

01:20:52:12

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, there is a story that Barack Obama details in his memoir that really it was more an effort of his part to explain the complexities of race in families. His grandmother, when they lived in the Punahou apartments,

would go down the street to a bus stop to wait to take the bus to the bank, and she expressed sort of dismay or concern or fright that there was a Black man at the bus stop who seemed to be not harassing her but a little bit intimidating, and it scared her. She brought that up in Young Barry's presence to Stanley, her husband. They were all in the apartment when she mentioned it several times and Stanley tried to persuade her that there's nothing to be worried about. It hit Barack, young Barry in a different way, which was, he's Black. My own grandmother who I live with who brought me up is afraid of a Black man. Is it because of the color of his skin? Is she afraid of me? What does that say about race in America that the skin color of someone could be that intimidating to my own grandmother who lives with a Black grandson? He describes that in the book in that sense that he felt utterly alone at that moment because even the woman who's raising him who loves him as much as anybody in the world is afraid of his race, meaning of him perhaps. And that's the way that he interpreted it.

Racism in school

01:22:36:09

DAVID MARANISS:

Young Barry at Punahou School, a private prep school in Honolulu, the finest one there. In his early years there, he—he played tennis and he was part of a club that would play tennis after school or in the summers, and the tennis coach at one point they put up a—he put up a list of who would be playing who in a tournament. Barry Obama put his hand up to the list to find out where he was and the Tennis coach says, "Get your hands off that, don't

smear it." You know, I don't remember the exact wording but it was interpreted as meaning because you have Black hands. Several of Barry's contemporaries heard that and it was sort of a moment—one of the few really in that period of overt adult racism that Barry confronted and it—it was etched in his memory and those of many of his classmates.

Being chubby as a boy

01:23:43:15

DAVID MARANISS:

Well, a lot of boys start out chubby and then… you know, change. I mean, Barry… Barack Obama has been incredibly in shape ever since, but– but as a– as a little boy he was– he was chubby. A little bear––they called him bear, that was his nickname and it– it had several senses: it came from Barack and Barry, but it also was he looked like a little teddy bear. Um, and uh I think that at some point he realized that's not what he wanted to be. And uh, started running and getting in shape, which he's done ever since.

Basketball and identity

01:24:26:05

DAVID MARANISS:

Well, first of all, he loved to play basketball and it was a way of him belonging at Punahou. There was a group of kids who'd play in the playgrounds there and nearby every day, and that as he was sort of in his early adolescence, the University of Hawaii had this really good basketball team that was predominantly African American. That was something for him finally to

identify with as a young Black kid because there weren't that many African Americans in Honolulu, but this basketball team just sort of obsessed him and helped drive his–both his feelings about self-identity and being Black and also feeling connected to something for the first time in Honolulu, it was basketball. It really drove him from then on. And so his favorite NBA players were like Nate Archibald and Julius Irving and , he didn't know them of course, but it was another way of starting to find his identity. He was a very good basketball player, left-handed. He—you know, a stereotype of an African American basketball player is they have good legs. He was called "no jump Obama". He couldn't get off the ground very well, but he was very dexterous; a good dribbler and a good passer. Punahou's high school team was terrific. It had a future NFL player on the team who was a very good athlete, several—two others who played college baseball, one basketball. Really good athletes. In his memoir, Barack Obama would say that he didn't start because he played Black basketball and the coach wanted a more disciplined style of basketball. I can understand why he argued that, but all of the other players on the team said that was BS. That, you know, they all dunked, Barry couldn't dunk. And he was actually a pretty disciplined player; he wasn't—you know, he wasn't a wild fast break player. Why he said that I'm not sure except that he—maybe he was–– he felt he should have been a starter and he wasn't good enough and he was looking for a rationalization. You know, the– the whole notion of Barack's search for his identity as a Black man is- is very complicated, and I don't think anybody including me who studied his life for years, should say point blank one way or the other what he was feeling and what he was doing because he was the young Black man

experiencing it, but as someone who studied it, I could see points where to me, it look—and to many people around him, it looked like, in retrospect, he was trying to show himself as being blacker at that point than the world saw him as. You know, that's a pretty touchy subject so, you know, I deal with it in what I think is a sensitive way because only he really knows what he was feeling at those points of course. But he wasn't expressing it outwardly and the basketball team was this wonderful polyglot of players of—of Hawaiian, Anglo, one was half-African and Indian. One guy, Tom Topolinski, you think was Polish, he was Chinese. That's the way Hawaii was. So it was a very international basketball team and Obama, you know, at one point he says that his name might've stuck out. In fact, Obama is a Japanese name, too. So nobody thought it was unusual at all in that sense. And so there are points where perhaps he was trying to make racial points for an understandable larger purpose, but they didn't fit the specifics of his own life. That whole sort of Black basketball versus white basketball is a larger expression of his search for self-identity, but it really wasn't applicable to his own situation.

Recreational substance use

01:28:50:11

DAVID MARANISS:

Well, I would say that if Barack Obama had an addiction, it was to cigarettes, which he was still copping smokes in the White House after he told Michelle he'd quit. But beyond that, I think it was you know, his early days drinking beer and smoking weed with his buddies who called themselves the choom gang. And choom means weed in Hawaii, that's a nickname for it. You know, I

think it was sort of typical of his group of kids and—and Hawaii was, in that era, rife with Marijuana. It was easy to get and most of the teenagers at Punahou were smoking and so was he. You know, his group maybe a little more so. They were not rebels, but they were a little bit outside of the in crowd and a little hipper. You know, he went into college in the cocaine era. He did some of that, too. But he grew out of that. He didn't have—he had—he was not an alcoholic, he was not addicted to alcohol nor did he develop any drug addictions, but he certainly partook.

Occidental College

01:30:01:03

DAVID MARANISS:

When Barry was growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia, he was really apart from the United States. And you know, Hawaii is a state but it's off the mainland and so you're sort of feeling isolated, so he finally got to the mainland when he started college at Occidental in suburban Los Angeles—he changed in many ways in those two years. It was a very important crucible. Occidental didn't have a large African American student population, but there were several and he started to- to- to hang out with—with a more international crowd, both African Americans and a lot of Pakistani and Indian kids who were at Occidental then. And through that, he started to develop a political sensibility for the first time. This was the era of protest again—for divestment against Apartheid South Africa, that was the student movement of that era and Barack, you know, wearing a leather jacket, smoking, looking cool, being a smart kid, sort of became one of the—the figures in that

movement at Occidental. He'd been struggling—he still was searching for his identity, as individually in terms of race. But he was starting to find his identity in terms of what he wanted to do with his life. His mother, who had sp—devoted her life to working with poor women in Indonesia and India and Pakistan and really sort of giving of herself, always taught her son that that's what he had to do as well, to work for the betterment of humankind. You know, he sort of heard the story, but he didn't really buy into it—start to until he got to Occidental and saw that there was a larger mission he felt for himself.

Dating before Michelle

01:31:58:17

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, before he met Michelle, he dated white women, he dated Asian women, and he might have dated another African American at Occidental although that's not clear that he might've. Someone he writes about there sort of has all of Michelle's attributes so it's a little bit iffy. But in any case, he was definitely… still in that search for home and many of the white women that he dated knew that they were not the right thing for him. Even as mu—you know, they were– they fell for him, they loved him, they thought he was brilliant and handsome and interesting, but there was a sense that it wasn't gonna go much further. And he would—he—he had what one of his girlfriends, Genevieve, called a veil, what—that she could not penetrate, sort of protecting him from- from the world, but also from any intimate relationship of that sort. That's a characteristic that he showed throughout

his political career as well, sort of being somewhat removed. But the first veil was in terms of personal relationships with women and it took Michelle to break through that.

Meeting Genevieve Cook

01:33:21:11

DAVID MARANISS:

Shortly after he graduated Columbia, Barack Obama was invited to a party where he met a young woman who was at Bankstreet College then and working for a book publisher, and they just started talking in the kitchen and that developed into a long relationship with a woman named Genevieve.

Columbia University

01:33:49:10

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, it's interesting that—that Barack transferred from Occidental, where he had a ton of friends, where he sort of developed his sense of future and ambition, and was well known and well liked to Columbia where he sort of disappeared for two years. You know, there's a chapter I call the moviegoer. He was sort of looking at life from a- from a distant perspective of a movie during that period. He wasn't interacting much; he played some basketball at the Columbia gym. He had a few Pakistani friends, some that he knew from Occidental and elsewhere, but most of his classmates at Columbia have no memory of him. There was a—there was a Black student union there and Barack Obama was not remembered as being part of that. He was really

in the deepest, introspective part of his life. He walked around the upper west side carrying a paperback copy of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in his back pocket. And he really was sort of that invisible man. Looking at the world, the world not seeing him. But nonetheless, those—those years were very important for him starting—or continuing that process of finding his identity.

Self-reliance

01:35:15:02

DAVID MARANISS:

The main way that—that young Barack Obama adjusted to unsettled circumstances, was to recede into himself and not rely on the world to explain to him, but to try to find it out for himself. I often compare him, in that sense, to another president I wrote about, Bill Clinton, who came out of similar dysfunction; a family with an alcoholic stepfather who came out of nowhere, Southwest Arkansas, Hawaii, and they dealt with it in such opposite ways. Bill Clinton needed this affirmation from the world at all times and that sense of inventing himself over and over again, every day. And that's how he resolved sort of the loneliness of his life. Barack Obama did just the opposite in trying to find himself. He didn't need that affirmation from the rest of the world. He found it—he spent all of those years at Occidental and Columbia and a little bit after, finding out himself and trying to be—make himself an integrated personality that didn't rely on the rest of the world, and in both of those instances, those characteristics took Bill Clinton, that ability to reinvent himself and keep going and get—needing affirmation took him all the way to

the White House, then would get him in trouble in the White House and out of trouble. Those sa—the opposite characteristics of Barack Obama, who came out of similar circumstances aside from race, helped get him to the White House, that self confidence really drove him all the way to the White House and then would get him in trouble in the White House because it was thought that he didn't need people enough, he didn't reach out enough. But really it all stems from how he dealt with being left and feeling alone, just finding it within himself.

Self-confidence

01:37:14:13

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, I think that his self-confidence came from nature and nurture. His father, who he didn't know, for all of his flaws, was a man who was full of self-esteem. His mother inculcated in young Barry, her son, that he could change the world. At some point, he started to feel that from within himself and that introspection really helped it grow to the point where by the time he was in Chicago, he felt a certain sense of destiny.

Obama's experience at Business International

01:37:59:06

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack's experiences at Business International, I'm not sure how they affected him. He—he—actually, he was the only professional African American on the staff, but he befriended the secretaries, who were Black.

And, sort of they– they treated him like a nephew in many ways and that was a certain warmth that he started to feel, that he really felt when he got to Chicago. But he first started to feel it at this Business International, which you know, some people thought it was a CIA front. It was doing all of these odd reports for places around the world. He felt pretty disconnected from its mission. At that point, he was not enraptured at all with being part of corporate America and that was a little too close to it. And that's really part of the reason why he went to Chicago, to get away from that. He could've after he graduated from Columbia, gone right into the corporate world like so many of his contemporaries did. He did a little bit of that and then said, that's not for me.

Chicago

01:39:08:17

DAVID MARANISS:

Chicago is the—in many ways the end of the arc of Obama's search for self-identity. He arrived in Chicago just coincidentally within the same period as Michael Jordan got to Chicago and became the most famous athlete in the world, Oprah Winfrey arrived in Chicago and became the most famous celebrity in the world, in some ways. And Barack Obama who was anonymous also got there in the early 80's—you know, mid 80's. But when he got there, he—he went to the Southside of Chicago and was, for the first time, feeling himself in the embrace of a real Black community. That was essential to his whole search. Finally, it was there. He worked as an organizer with poor people on the deep Southside of Chicago. He got to know the ministers, the reverends of that part of Chicago and really the Obama that

you—you hear today, the cadences he learned. He didn't have those cadences. He learned them on the Southside of Chicago. You know, he has two speeches. One is sort of a professorial academic constitutional lawyer speech, and the other is an emotional speech. And that's what he learned in Chicago from Black Chicago, from the Reverends there. There were all of these women, older women that he worked with who embraced him much like the secretaries did in New York, and he felt that warmth and really for the first time really felt fully part of the African American community in the United States. And that's what Chicago gave him, is that sense at last of home.

Reverend Alvin Love

01:41:07:03

DAVID MARANISS:

When Barack was organizing, he went to the churches on the Southside looking for—for allies and one of those was Reverend Love who saw this kid walking up the street of—well you know, what does he want? And it was—it turned into a very productive, healthy exchange where, sort of, Love introduced him to that community of– of the churches of Chicago. Really directed him finally to the church where Obama ended up. But sort of opened up that life to him in many ways. And Love saw in Barack Obama a young man who was gonna go somewhere.

Reverend Jeremiah Wright

01:41:50:19

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, I think there are some misperceptions about Reverend Wright's church. It was—I mean Reverend Wright himself was very outspoken and unafraid and unapologetic about the racism that he saw in America. But that church was very popular among professional young Black Chicagoans. It was the place to go. It wasn't necessarily the place to go only because of Reverend Wright, but because it had this aura about it that it wasn't stodgy, stuck in the past, that it was looking forward and that it had a lot of social activism to it. You know, it wasn't a place to go to- to express radical thought. It was really a place where you felt at home with fellow professional Chicagoans. That's what brought Barack and Michelle to that church. It wasn't necessarily just Wright's—you know, some of the more provocative comments he made over the years, which during Obama's campaign became controversial and made Obama withdraw from him somewhat. It wasn't like that when he was going to that church. He was more—well within the realm of what was considered acceptable, traditional progressive thought in Black Chicago.

Moral compass

01:43:16:09

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack Obama's book is called *Dreams From My Father*, but in fact it was his mother who shaped him more than any other human being. Even—even though she wasn't always there. Sometimes he lived with his grandparents; it was his mother's voice, his mother's voice saying do the right thing, do unto others, you have a purpose in life, put yourself in someone else's shoes. Of all

of those sort of humanistic impulses that vibrate in Barack Obama's political career, they're his mother's voice.

Hyde Park Hair Salon

01:43:56:11

DAVID MARANISS:

For one of the first times in his life, Barack Obama was sort of hearing and being part of the give and take of regular Black life in the Southside of Chicago. Um, it was a cadence, it was a sort of… sense of humor, a sense of optimism and reality of what we're really dealing with here, where power is, of how to deal with that. All of those sort of subtle markers of being a Black man in the United States that for various reasons not his—of his doing, he wasn't able to experience until he got there. And so the Barbershop was probably as educational for Barack Obama as Occidental or Columbia.

Family in Kenya

01:44:56:10

DAVID MARANISS:

The Kenyan part of his ancestry of his life was a distant shadow to him until he got to Kenya, and so there was this immediate overwhelming sensation — different from Chicago because Chicago was really a deeper sense of home. Kenya could never be home. It defined his history in a way that he was unable to really define until he got there and saw his blood relatives from Kenya and felt that part of the experience. The first reaction was deeply emotional. The second reaction, which he also chronicles fairly honestly, is

confusion and chaos. Who are all these relatives? Why don't they get along? You know, there's all these different competing factions within his large African family. What is with the chaos of Africa? How do I–– How do I process that? Where does my father fit into that? Where does my step-grandmother, Mama Sara, fit into that? Where does my half-sister Alma fit into that, and all these other relatives? So it was a lot for him to process and you know, Kenya was at once exhilarating and exhausting for him.

Obama's visit to his father's grave

01:46:23:05

DAVID MARANISS:

Out in Western Kenya, getting to the homestead, feeling the presence of his father for the first time, there's something about a gravesite that even though you don't see the body, it's just a symbol—it's a little more than a symbol. And so I think that what he was weeping for were several things at once. His own sense of loss, that he didn't know this man. A sense of-- of his loss for his father, whose dreams were never realized, who died young and troubled and had a difficult life. Maybe weeping for Africa itself, which was torn apart by tribal frictions and violence, and also a sense of, 'this is why I exist.' All of those were probably flowing through him when he was crying there.

Crying

01:47:31:18

DAVID MARANISS:

I've never seen him cry. Um, you've never seen him cry. No one watching this has ever seen him–– um, I think he cried after the shootings in Connecticut. Um, that was as close as I've seen it. Maybe once, talking to his staff after his final–– after his second–– uh, after he left the office of president. So, I should take that back. We've seen him cry a couple of times, but it's not part of his personality. He's a very reserved, composed human being who—he—he is able to express emotion, but he doesn't show anger and there are a lot of reasons for that, a lot of racial reasons even and you know, the way—expectations of racist white society about Black men showing anger, what that means. He doesn't show that much. And the—the expression of crying is something that he's held back as well. He's a reserved human being by nature, but in his book and in descriptions that I've got from people, there are several instances where in private, he's—he's crying. He's—you know, because think about the life he's endured, that he's lived through. There are a lot of emotional trigger points in that. Going to the grave of his father is one. Feeling–– because he never had a normal life with a family, the sense of family he gets from his own daughters is so powerful that I think that affected what he was thinking about these families in Connecticut that lost their children when they were murdered in the school. I think that triggered that part of the emotion. And ther—there's several trigger points for him like that, but he doesn't show them publicly very often at all. There are a few points where he has shown it. And you know, that was—think of all they've gone through, that they'd done this. There are points in his career—a few publicly where the power of the moment has overcome his tendency to be reserved in public.

Michelle Obama

01:49:53:17

DAVID MARANISS:

Michelle Robinson had gone through Harvard Law School, Princeton before that, was back in Chicago working at a law firm and was assigned to help this new kid who was just coming in, Barack Obama. She had a lot of attributes that whether he knew it or not he was looking for. And probably the most important was that she was rooted in a community, in a family, in a culture that he had been looking for. So her extended family on the Southside of Chicago held such a profound meaning to him along with her own beauty and smarts and natural attributes, that combination was overwhelming and she wasn't naturally, inherently looking for him but he sure was looking for her.

Illinois State Senator

01:50:59:13

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack's experience as a State Senator is under-appreciated in terms of his evolution and his ability to reach the White House. Most ambitious Black politicians or ambitious politicians period in Chicago would take the root of going to the city council and trying to become Mayor and going through city politics. That was a hornet's nest. Springfield was much easier in dealing with sort of the dynamics of politics. There were some other ambitious young Black legislators who didn't like him. They thought he was too urban, too citified by the east coast, by a prep school and Harvard. That he wasn't Black

enough. They would say that you know, out loud and they went after him for that, not showing his Blackness, not being part of the community enough. And so he had to deal with that in—in—in Springfield. He developed a lot of strong friendships there. He developed an ability to transcend race politics there. A lot of his friends in the legislature were white guys from different parts of Illinois, from white Illinois. He played poker with them, he learned how to negotiate, he learned how to deal with republicans there. Somewhat out of the limelight of the—or the fire of Chicago city politics, he was able to sort of learn his way through all of those dynamics in Springfield. One can imagine that it wasn't really a place he wanted to be and he'd drive back to Chicago as often as he could. Springfield is a fairly isolated small town, but it was very important in his evolution.

Bobby Rush

01:53:03:05

DAVID MARANISS:

All of Obama's outward demeanor hides a steely resolve inside. And Bobby Rush saw that, though Bobby Rush creamed him because in that instance, those Black legislators in Springfield were saying that Obama wasn't Black enough, Bobby Rush was the real deal. He was a former Black Panther running in a district that was largely African American. Obama didn't have a chance against that argument there. But Rush did see Obama's steely resolve in going after him in that-- in that election and there were—there were hard feelings for decades after that between the two. And then there's this one moment when President Obama is leaving the well of the house after giving

the State of the Union, and Congressman Rush is leaning over the aisle to shake hands with Obama. I think it was the last of his State of the Union Addresses and you could see finally sort of this reconnection and warmth there of Rush realizing that this guy who went after him hard also went after a lot of people that were their mutual enemies and succeeded and got somewhere that Rush himself could never get. That election taught Obama many things and he—one of the things it taught him is that he shouldn't run from a district like that and his district was redrawn later where he could raise a lot of money for his eventual run for the US Senate.

"Not Black enough"

01:54:51:00

DAVID MARANISS:

I think that that question of how Black he is keeps following him in the same way that a lot of unschooled, ignorant whites would say, why does he call himself Black, you know he's half white, why doesn't he say he's half white? Well, in America it was their society that decided that he was Black, that made all of those decisions about how you define somebody. So, you know, whether he was Black enough or why he wasn't white, you know, two sides—two opposite sides of the same coin. What Barack Obama was trying to do was figure out a way to resolve that, which he's always trying to do to encompass all of it. So he was never going to be—he found his personal home in the Black community, but he always wanted to be larger than that. I mean, think about the forces that shaped him, they're global forces. He's a universalist personality. He never wanted to limit himself. As a matter of fact,

at one point he wrote a letter to another girlfriend about how he saw all of his friends finding their identity in one place or one job and narrowing himselves—themselves in that way and he never wanted to do that and didn't feel he could do that. And for him to get to where he wanted to go, he had to encompass it all. So he was always going to get attacked from either side somewhat but he-- he found a way to transcend both of those complaints.

Balancing family and politics

01:56:28:06

DAVID MARANISS:

It's another variation of that constant tension between ambition and idealism. It plays out in a lot of different ways in all politicians. Part of his tension there was between family and ambition. The ideal family, which he wanted to try to create because he never experienced it and his ambition for his political rise. It created not only tensions within himself but with his wife Michelle and you know, having one daughter and then two and being away from them in Springfield and then in the United States Senate. I mean all of that was—I don't know whether he was unique in that way. I think that all politicians, some much worse than him, sort of abandoned their families. There's a natural tendency among leaders, in sports or politics, to be able to create a stronger family out of strangers, a team, or voters, or supporters, than out of their own nuclear family. Barack never gave that part of it up. He—you know, there was push and pull there. But the family sensibility was always on his conscience and eventually he was able to bring it all together;

ironically by getting to the White House where they could all live together for the first time. He wouldn't have to travel away from them as much.

The Obamas as a role model family

01:57:55:22

DAVID MARANISS:

I wouldn't give it solely to him. I think that that family, Michelle probably being stronger than Barack in many ways, pierced a lot of the stereotypes of the—of racist stereotypes in America and had a meaning that is so much more powerful than a single policy, what that family was able to do to—to make people see that this was America too and a deep part of America I think. You know, Barack is the father, Michelle is the mother, the two smart, beautiful daughters. That's the role model, that whole family.

Racism during Obama's presidential campaign

01:58:47:06

DAVID MARANISS:

Barack Obama wasn't the first African American to run for president. Not even the first one to be taken seriously and win primaries. Jesse Jackson paved the way for him. In 1988, Jesse Jackson predicted that 20 years from now there'd be another one to follow. And it turned out it was Barack Obama. Racism is the central thread of—the central broken thread of American history. And to expect that—that even—even though President Obama succeeded, you know, succeeded. Barack Obama succeeded in becoming president. To expect that racism would disappear or that it would be

transcended by his election or his candidacy or his presidency is incredibly naïve. So, he endured and Michelle endured, you know, cartoonish stereotypes of the most hideous sort. There was an effort to paint him as something that he wasn't, which is common in politics period, but as a—when it takes on a racial—racist tinge, it takes it to a different level. The whole connection to Reverend Wight(Wright) and his explosive rhetoric endangered Obama's ambitions. He managed to overcome it with a speech in Philadelphia that transcended that and put it into a context that was one of the most powerful speeches he'd give in explaining the history of race in America and his place in it. Even someone like Bill Clinton sort of hinted at racial aspects of Barack Obama. Clinton who himself wouldn't have ever been president without his African American support and connections. It's unavoidable that Obama experienced more racial opposition than any presidential candidate before him because he got there and he succeeded and had to overcome it and he was a threat and we're still dealing with that in so many different ways. And you know, for all of the attacks that we've seen on the Internet and in public, it's the tip of the iceberg of what he really endured, just like who knows how many death threats he got as president. We'll learn that from history. But we don't know it yet but it's—it's uncountable and unfathomable what he had to endure.

Criticism for talking down to the Black community

02:01:27:19

DAVID MARANISS:

The whole notion of how Obama talked to African Americans, as a community or however you want to describe it, is complicated. It's complicated by his own racial composition. It's complicated by his universalist sensibility versus only a Black perspective, and it's complicated by his optimistic idealism that's not rooted in the difficult reality that so many—like a kid growing up in Chicago as opposed to Hawaii and Indonesia had to deal with. It depends on your perspective. There's a certain amount of that criticism that's valid, but it's valid from that perspective but when you look at it from above and see what he was trying to say and do, it's more understandable. Some of the criticism is valid. I think he understood it and was trying to rise above it.

Obama's mother's passing

02:02:35:22

DAVID MARANISS:

Stanley Ann Dunham, the most powerful influence in Barack's life. But someone who he, as his own ambitions were bubbling up and he was—he married Michelle and he was starting to think about his political career and he was rooted in Chicago and she had been traveling around the world and then got sick and went back to Hawaii. He wasn't there. Over the course of the 1980's and into the 90's, he had sort of removed himself from her more and more. He had gone to visit her in Hawaii but was back in Chicago when she died and I think he's always felt a certain amount of guilt for that. Part of their complex, beautiful, but complicated relationship, that he was not there. He went back uh, you know, with his–– the-- the half sister that he's closest

to. Um, and uh… the daughter of Lolo and Ann. Um, and uh together they went to a very meaningful place, the Ironing Board, it's this protrusion of rock that goes out into the ocean, um, outside of Honolulu. Um, and spread her ashes into the sea, which is, um, where she would want to be. She was–– she was part of this larger ocean of-- of the world. And, you know, I think that the Ironing Board–– going back for that was another one of those… moments as emotional as when he went to the grave site of his father, and I'm sure ten times deeper because his mother was so much more a part of his life. And so much more responsible for what he became.

Obama's grandmother's passing

02:04:46:06

DAVID MARANISS:

I think one of the lessons he learned from missing his mother's death was he was not going to miss his grandmother. She was dying and he was in the midst of his campaign and went back to Honolulu to be with her… toward the end and it was a—when he came back, it was a point where he could sort of express his emotion and what Hawaii meant to him, what the grandmother meant to him, what the polyglot of the United States meant to him, that she was so much a part of that even though, as he would often say, she didn't—she wasn't a hugger. She was the rock for his early life. Without her he would have been lost and so it was very important for him and of course she died right when he was elected.

Republican resistance

02:05:40:06

DAVID MARANISS:

I don't think you can ever separate politics from race when it comes to Barack Obama. I think that when McConnell said that their ambi—their goal was to make him a one-term president, it was mostly political, not racial. Obama's race was always an underlying factor in the hostility towards him. But I would say it was more what he stood for. It made it ten times harder for him because his whole—you know, how did he become president and why? The first—the first and most important reason was the speech he gave in 2004 at the Democratic Convention where he said there are not red states and blue states but The United States, where his whole theme was bringing the divergent threads of America together and he gets elected president and the republicans say, forget that, we don't want that, we don't want you. And so he had to fight against that his whole presidency.

Cornel West

02:06:50:03

DAVID MARANISS:

There are a lot of complicated reasons for why Cornel West was criticizing Barack Obama. He even acknowledged himself that he thought Obama would embrace him and bring him into his interior advisory council and it didn't happen, so there was some measure of animosity out of feeling left out. There's also the aspect that Obama understands, even if he doesn't like it, that people need to be pushed. So when Tavis Smiley or Cornel West or various people in the Black community were criticizing him and pushing him.

Even if he disagrees, he understands that being pushed is something that people need, leaders need. People in power need to be pushed. Cornel West might—might have been valid in some of his points; he might have been full of it in others. It might have been motivated by idealism or personal jealousy, a combination of those probably and Obama withstood it and kept going and understood that his job was to represent everybody. That's what a president is supposed to do. That's what his successor did not do, which only accentuates further what Obama was trying to do.

Obama's presidency in retrospect

02:08:15:14

DAVID MARANISS:

You know, it's so hard to define anything right now as we speak because of what's going on in the world with President Trump, but I think that history will look at Obama as the first of what would come. 50 years from now, there'll be Black presidents, there'll be women presidents, there'll be Asian presidents. You know, the United States is changing, Hispanic presidents. Barack Obama was the first of that. I think that, you know, despite this sort of retrograde retrenchment that we're—we're living through in the Trump era, that history is on Obama's side. Of course there are frustrations, enormous frustrations. You know, some incidental, like was he schmoozing enough with Congress. I think in time that will fade and especially when you see how retrenched this congress was against him. I think he was trying to move the country in the right direction in terms of the environment. Global warming, all of these things that 50 years from now will—people will realize were the

real issues, the larger issues will be the ones that last 50 years from now and that's how Obama will be judged on the right side of those.

Donald Trump

02:09:38:13

DAVID MARANISS:

Well, you know, interestingly enough, when he was running for president, Trump said one true thing among all the lies, which is, "I'm your last chance." He sort of presented himself like that to those who people who felt they'd—that the changes in America were alien to them, frightening to them, taking away their power, leaving them feeling adrift, and so he appealed to that and I think that it's—I think it's a speed bump in history. I think it was probably Obama intensified it because of who he was, a Black man. Because of what he represented, a changing America. An America of many colors and… changes in gender identification, racial identification, the modern coming world, I think. So this was the last attempt to stop what is probably inevitable, if we survive. So the short term is iffy, but the long term is Obama's. There's nothing that Trump can do to change that. He can only intensify the fear and sense of being left behind that his supporters feel, and they're getting a sense of identity out of him. Um, but they're a minority. And so, in the end, they can't prevail. Um, and so, I think that the change that Obama represented… you know, I guess I'm–– I vacillate between I'm naturally optimistic, the glass is half full and sometimes I think the world is completely screwed these days, but I still have to believe, and I think that science and demography and

humanity and history all show that—that what Obama represented is the future.

Trayvon Martin

02:12:14:14

DAVID MARANISS:

There was constant pressure on Obama to speak more about race or less about race, right? You know, some people would say that race had nothing to do with it; we've transcended race, we're not racist, none of that. Some people were saying, "You're a Black man, why aren't you addressing—speaking the way we want you to?" And Obama from the beginning was thinking, "I'm president of all the United States." That was his whole message from the beginning and so he tried to follow that and it would lead to frustrations. There were times when he seemed out of the zeitgeist a little bit, but he was always probably a little ahead of it in terms of where he wanted to go and where he wanted the country to go. So, there were a lot of times where he was reluctant to speak directly as a Black man in the United States because he was president of the United States. He did it as a candidate when he gave the speech in Philadelphia reacting to Reverend Wright, but that was really more of a presentation of his Universalist perspective, with some sort of saying, "You have to understand how a Black man views things." Then when Trayvon Martin was killed, he gave a speech that to me was sort of a release for him where he said, "I was Trayvon Martin." Think of Barack Obama at age 16 in Honolulu, you know, part of the choom gang, smoking dope, drinking beer, being black skinned. He could've been shot by some

crazy guy and we never would have heard of him. He was Trayvon Martin. That was the—the point where he was sort of saying, you know, this is my life too that we're dealing with here and—and it was a—he was able to do it in a personal way that—that I thought was more expressive—expressing things that he hadn't felt he could do before that.

Amazing Grace

02:14:23:05

DAVID MARANISS:

That moment in-- in Charleston where he went to the Eulogy after a white racist kid had shot and killed Black parishioners. When he ended that—that eulogy by starting *Amazing Grace*, in a deep, somewhat shaky, emotional but powerful voice, and the whole church joined in. He chose the right song, and, you know, written by a former slave shipman. Sort of both capturing humanity and the Black church and all of us at once. But singing it in a Black church and giving the Black sentiment behind that forgiving—I mean, you know, when you think about the history of America, Black Americans have been much more forgiving than anyone else for reasons that we should all be grateful for, and he was sort of reminding us of that too. It was—it was the most emotional, powerful point of his presidency, I thought.

Avoiding traps

02:15:50:17

DAVID MARANISS:

What runs through that life, along with a search for home, was his ability and need and desire to avoid traps, the traps that life set up for him all along the way, which explain a lot of the actions that we've talked about. You know, the trap of being born in Hawaii thousands of miles away from anywhere, you know? The trap of being born neither- a hoppa, half Black and half white and trying to find the identity. The trap of being Black and not being able to overcome the anger and hostility that he might feel that would limit him in his attempt to rise to the presidency. The trap of Chicago politics, which he avoided by going down to Springfield and not going into city politics. I'm not saying that it was calculating, but it was inherent in him to find a way to get to a point where he could try to encompass so much more than the traps would allow him to. I think that there are many points, especially in his presidency, where his supporters were—felt frustrated, like why isn't he immediately acting in this way. And of course, that frustration was valid and understandable, but they weren't understanding the way he operates. He doesn't work in the normal timeframe of modern sound bite America. He's always looking a little beyond that and trying to figure his way through the traps to get where he wants to go.

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