MICHELE NORRIS INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Michele Norris
Journalist
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
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START TC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

Michele Norris interview, take one, marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Michele Norris

Journalist

Meeting Obama

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MICHELE NORRIS:

My husband had known and had worked with him through politics. I'm a working journalist. I was a working journalist, I was working at NPR. I was doing a story about Democrats following—I think it was following the midterms if I'm remembering this correctly, but I was doing a story about Chicago and Democrats' messaging and the Democratic Party's ability to reach voters through its messaging. And I was calling people. I'd worked in

Chicago as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune years ago, so I knew a lot of people who worked in Chicago politics, and I was calling around, and I was saying, "Who should I talk to? Who are—you know, I know some of the party stalwarts but who are the newer voices that I should be talking to?" And several people including David Axelrod said, "You need to talk to this guy named Barack Obama. And so, I called him and the first conversation I had with him was actually over—over the phone, and it was really interesting. He was saying things that were in some ways in line with the Democratic Party but he had a different way of thinking and he had a very expansive way of thinking, and he was thinking that they needed—they, the Democrats and he as a politician needed to try to message in a way that tried to reach all voters as opposed to assuming that there were people who weren't going to listen to you and who were going to oppose everything you stood for and everything that you tried to do. He was an incredible communicator and that he was—among—before I even got to know him, one of the most confident people I had ever seen. You know, sometimes if you've covered politics for a long time, you can see people's political wheels working, and it seemed that he was speaking from someplace else. That he was willing to take risks in the messages that he delivered and that he was confident in his own ideas and willing to sort of step outside what was expected of him.

Michelle Obama

01:02:33:00

MICHELE NORRIS:

I'll share a story from an early campaign visit. We were in South Carolina and we were—I think it was—it may have been the Phillis Wheatley Homes in South Carolina, and I had gone out to do a story on—on her as a potential first lady. What life was like for her on the campaign trail, how people were responding to her message. And so the first stop on the day, we went to a large event, typical political even. 200 tables in the room, the place was packed, largely women of color, largely Black women, so they were dressed in their Sunday go to meeting clothes because they were there to see Michelle Obama. It was very personal, so she was talking about not just running for politics but what it was like to be a woman in America. And it was one of the sort of early points where she was delivering the message that now that we've heard quite commonly, but how you have to take care of yourself first before you take care of others. So—and she used an analogy that was—that was brilliant, because it was something that anybody who had ever flown could identify with. When you fly and you—you know, if you pay attention to the instructions that they give before the flight, they tell you that you put your own facemask on first before you help others. Even if you're with someone who is elderly, even if you're with your children, you put your own facemask on first, and she was delivering that message to this room of women, and it was interesting because she was speaking to a room full of Black women.

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And understanding that many of these women had been adorned, I guess to say it nicely, with the trope of the strong Black woman that you always—you're the center, you're the rock in your community, often in your family,

you take care of other people. And in doing that you don't always put yourself first. And she was telling this group of women, put yourself first, which was not necessarily a political message, but it was a very personal message, and in that afternoon over that chicken salad lunch or whatever they served that day, she took the room to church by talking about her own personal story and how she had learned how to do this and that she was better for it. She was a better wife, a better mother, a better person, because she put herself first. That was the kind of messaging that I had not heard, and I'd covered politics for a long time. The messaging was usually very careful, it was usually around you know, talking points that had been delivered, and she was seemingly off script and yet very authentic. And then later on in the day, we went to the community center and there were—she wanted to spend time with a group of young people so she met with a group of young people. And she knew that she had cameras, you know, with her and so she was putting the spotlight not just on herself but on—on young people that were at the center, and there was a—there were a couple of other moments that I remember from this reporting trip. We now know her as a hugger. You could see that even then. So she could tell, and she could read the room, so she was hugging these kids and talking to them and asking them about their stories.

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And as a reporter I noticed that she noticed the kids—there's the child in the room that wanted attention but didn't know how to move their self to the front of the room, someone who was shy, who didn't know how to raise their hand, and somehow she knew who that person was and even though they were standing three feet off and maybe not the most popular or the most

talkative kid, her radar took her to that child, and she went and gave that child some time and gave that child a hug and basically said to that child, I see you, and because she was followed by cameras, you know, the world is gonna see you too. Then later we toured the center, and it's a place where there's, you know, athletic facilities and meeting halls and there was a dance studio in there, and there was someone who was giving dance lessons, and so she watched the kids as they went through their routine with a dance instructor who was a taskmaster. You know, you're off beat, you're off beat, you know—and then he said—after they did the number, he turned to her and he said, "We would love if you would—since you've watched us go through the routine, and we understand that you like to dance, we would love if you would join us." Most people who are in the public eye who are attached to someone who was running for the highest office of the land would not say yes to that because the footage would live somewhere or the cameras, you know, would capture it and she just so quickly said, "Sure, I'll dance with the kids, I'll get in line." And then she turned to me and said, "But I'll only do it if Michele does it too."

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And as a reporter, you're usually on the periphery. And she just said it like, are you planning to say no 'cause I'm waiting for you to get up, and I looked at my producer, Andrea Shu, and she goes, "Just go." And so, you know, I got up, and I did it, and we did this lan—this line dance, you know, with these—with these kids, and it was—I remember it because it was unusual for you know, me to do something like that in a reporting trip, but I also remember it because she stepped outside of herself in a way that you didn't necessarily

see. Politics at that level which is so carefully scripted and where everyone is so aware and to some degree worried about the image that might be projected to the world. She in that moment was worried about the image, or not worried, just her concern. Her concern was with the image she was protect—that she was projecting to the young people in the room. And now that I've gotten to know her and I've seen her on a world stage and I've also gotten to know her personally, I see that the person that I saw all those years ago. The person who can spot someone in the room who is standing in the need of attention or standing in the need of an ear or a hug. The person who is willing to stand up and move physically to show joy, to show a sense of purpose, is the person that we all got to know. I mean, later on we all saw her dancing and moving and doing jumping jacks and doing pushup competitions and you know, doing a hula hoop on the back lawn, not just to show joy but also in a very strategic way. To put a spotlight on young people who are so often ignored in America, often children of color or often children who are disadvantaged but also in the service of the causes that she really cared about.

Children visiting the White House

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MICHELE NORRIS:

When historians look back at the eight years of the Obama presidency and they look at the vast trove of photographs and video from that era, they likely will be amazed at the number of children that went through that building on a regular basis and not just at the Easter egg roll and not just at the

Halloween party which are traditionally times when children get dressed up and come to the White House. They were there all the time. They were there for master classes, for poetry and fashion. They were there when Debbie Allen did a master class where little girls were running around all over the place learning routines that they had to deliver by that day at four o'clock or something like that. There were kids in the White House all the time officially and unofficially, because there were children who lived in the White House. They're one of a small number of families that actually lived as a family at the White House. So there were sleepovers, and there were parties, but officially there were children in the building all the time, and I think that reflects a few things that we now know about because of the way Michelle Obama in particular is telling her story. She grew up in a house where they liked to all be together. She would go to her grandfather's house, Southside and the family would all be there, so she likes to have people around. But strategically there seemed to be something at work also. A lot of the initiatives that she championed focused on young people. So the garden, the Let's Move! The Reach Higher, Better Make Room. And to underscore the importance of that work, she would bring children in to help work on the garden or to talk about ya know, college signing day, and they'd all bring in—that they'd all wear the sweatshirts of the college that they planned to attend. It might—might've been a way to help America see her in some way. We got to see her as the first lady of the United States, as someone who was already fashionable and gracious and confident.

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And what we didn't necessarily see in that moment was the young Michelle Robinson who grew up in humble but loving beginnings, who grew up on the Southside of Chicago as she says, listening to the sounds of striving in a neighborhood that was deteriorating, who went to eventually excellent schools but started out in schools that were troubled and there's a—an Anna Julia Cooper quote that I'm going to mangle so I'm not gonna say it in full but it basically is, you know, built around the notion of when and where I enter, I carry people with me. And that may have been at work also. As she enters this hallowed space, this American home, the most American of homes in some ways, she is bringing with her her history, and she is bringing with her young people who often are not seen in America and centering them and helping Americans see them and maybe helping Americans see themselves. And at the same time helping young people understand the role of democracy, helping expose young people to the kinds of things that they might not have access to. If you live in Washington, you sort of take the monuments and you take these grand buildings for granted. And as someone who's lived in Washington, I know that you drive by these buildings, and you think that other people live there, other people work there. There's official Washington and then there's unofficial Washington, and there's a great big chasm between those two things. And during that eight years, that chasm seemed to close. There were public schoolchildren in there all the time from Washington but also from all kinds of other areas. She opened her house to other people and made it feel like their house and not just those who were lucky enough to get an official tour or a ticket to the Easter egg roll.

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Criticism of Michelle Obama

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MICHELE NORRIS:

It's interesting that Michelle Obama in writing her book and telling her story has decided to talk about the criticism that she faced in a very honest way and so that people understood that it hurt, and people understood that it placed her in a box that was not of her making, but she writes about it, and she now talks about in a way that is not just individual, it's also universal. So she's saying this happened to me, and it really hurt, but understand that there are a lot of other women who labor under this kind of criticism. So when she was called the angry Black woman and it was something—it was a trope that stuck so easily, and she writes about the circular logic about this, the circular logic of that label in now telling her own story. That if you're—you're trying to deliver a message, you're trying to tell your story, you're trying to participate in life and letters, and people keep ignoring you, or people make assumptions about you that aren't true, your natural reaction would be perhaps to talk a little louder, to try to be heard, to try to correct the record. And then oh, you're getting angry again. So it becomes this sort of circular—circular log—this circular trope. So she talks about how much it hurt her but on behalf of women who face the same—the same kind of criticism, who face the same kind of false assumptions and the way that that is—is not just hurtful, but it's damaging. It's actually dangerous. It—it—it prevents people from participating fully in life and it places you—it places a pair of cement shoes on your feet that just pulls you down if you're not able to deal with that. She's talking about it now, but she didn't talk about it as it

was happening. She responded with grace. She responded with Teflon, you know, as Jay-Z does. You know, let it roll off your shoulder. But we now know that it really hurt. If we were honest with ourself at the time, we should have known that it hurt. How could it not hurt? And by talking about it honestly, I think she invites people to examine why was it so easy for us to use that repeatedly in headlines. Why was it so—why did it stick? Why was it so sticky in her case? And why were people making jokes about that kind of thing? It took a lot of courage I think for her to speak honestly about that. And by speaking honestly about it, I think it allows for conversation that might—I don't know if it's gonna extinguish these tropes but people will think about it more carefully.

Michelle Obama's platform

01:16:36:08

MICHELE NORRIS:

Mrs. Obama decided to tell her own story. She did so with great candor, and she talked about motherhood, and fertility, and marriage counseling, and the kind of things that you don't typically see in political memoir. As I listened to her talk about these things, it reminds me of another moment where we saw that happen. Betty Ford was very honest about things that people didn't talk about at that moment, and I remember this clearly because my mother is a breast cancer survivor, multiple times. And we didn't talk about breast cancer the way we talk about breast cancer now. You know, you turn on the TV, and you see football teams dressed in pink. You see people wearing their

pink ribbons. We have breast cancer awareness month now. That was not the case. You may have talked about cancer, you barely talked about cancer, but you certainly didn't talk about breast cancer. And when Betty Ford came forward and talked about her breast cancer, it changed the conversation, and I personally remember what that meant for my mother, and I personally remember what it meant for the women she was in support group with. I know that that made a difference. So I am certain that when someone who has the reach and the influence and frankly the adoration that someone like Michelle Obama has and she talks about fertility and she talks about marriage counseling, it allows for a conversation that is normally very difficult.

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And—and immediately, when—you know, you now measure things immediately on social media, and when she first started talking and when it was revealed that her book included—they talked about marriage counseling, she talked about IVF, she talked about the fact that Malia and Sasha were born through invitro-fertiliza—she actually talked about that? The media seized upon that, and those were the first headlines. She—she talked about the current president, she talked openly about marriage counseling, she talked about IVF. But then on the other side, social media also blew up with this me too IVF. I too have had you know, difficulty conceiving a child. We too are going through marriage counseling. Thank you for—for actually sharing this story because I have a hard time even talking to my co-workers about this because I feel like I'll be judged, I feel like I failed in some way. Like my body is not working the way that it's supposed to, and I can't talk to any about it—anybody about it. And yet she's talking about it, and it

made a space for other people to have a conversation around this on a public forum. That's using your platform in a very powerful way and not just giving salacious details of your life so you can sell books but actually using these details of your life and using that candor to make a way for someone else to actually have a conversation that otherwise would be very difficult.

Non-traditional media

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MICHELE NORRIS:

The Obama presidency will be examined and placed under a microscope by journalists and scholars and historians and storytellers for lots of different reasons. Of course because they were the first Black family to live in the White House, they were the first family to come from an urban setting to move into the White House; because the economic tumult that they inherited when they first moved into the White House because of climate change and technology. But technology is interesting because technology introduced a new way of communicating for an American president and for an American first family. Twitter and Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat, that all sort of blossomed throughout the run of the Obama presidency, and the way that they responded to it was interesting because it's easy to see how a politician could basically stay away from that. We don't understand it. We can't control it so we're not gonna touch that because in the White House, generally it's a very controlled environment.

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I mean, I remember covering the White House and still waiting for press releases. You'd get—there'd be like a whistle or you'd be told on the overhead speaker that, "We just issued a press release." And there'd be a thundering herd of people running forward to pick up a piece of paper that was delivered you know, in a slot on the wall. And suddenly, you had these media platforms that allowed people to communicate directly and—and just go around traditional media channels or traditional communication channels. So you could see easily how they would ignore it or perhaps be very afraid of it and they eventually embraced it in really interesting ways. And if you look at the record, I think Mrs. Obama was ahead of the White House in the full embrace of social media and non-traditional media. So you see her on Jimmy Fallon at night doing the mom dance. You see her on Jimmy Fallon with Will Ferrell, and they're joking in this sketch, but she's also trying to get them to eat rutabagas and so it's—you know, it—there's a message there. The way that they used social media and Instagram and messaging to work outside of traditional press release channels to help burnish her image, to help people see who she was. You know, around fashion, around how we eat, around how we take care of ourselves, was—was interesting and will be examined for all kinds of reasons and in part because of what came afterwards, and how social media is now used in a more weaponized way.

"Post-racial America"

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MICHELE NORRIS:

During the Obama candidacy, there was a word that was in vogue that is hard—it's hard to utter now with almost an eye roll, but throughout his candidacy, there were a lot of people, people of influence talking about the notion that America might be entering a post-racial status, that because of the ascendancy of his candidacy, because of the success of his candidacy, because of this transcendent moment where America with its history, with its complicated history around race had elected a Black man as president of the United States. Some interpreted that to mean that we were in a new space, that matters of race maybe wouldn't carry the same weight. Post-racial is an interesting word because it didn't—you know, it was a new word. If you actually look it up, it actually hadn't been used much. It's—it was not part of the American vernacular; you can actually study this. There—there—there have been studies on this, that it had been used, you know, less than a dozen times before 2006 and then suddenly it was everywhere, and words just don't sort of populate our lexicon like that. So it's interesting why we as a society embraced that word. Is it—was it—was it because—was it hope that maybe race would be less important? Was it hubris? Were we deluded? The idea that a family of color would move into the White House and that matters of race would be over? It seems almost ridiculous in retrospect. Perhaps we should have been putting our seatbelts on and preparing ourself for a rather bumpy ride. When he was elected as president of the United States, you know, there were a lot of Americans who had never had a Black boss, and here he was the highest authority figure in the land. People of color and men of color in particular were stripped of any notion of authority, and here he was being given the keys to the kingdom essentially. That ushered in several

conversations around race, and some of them were quite ugly. But some of them were quite positive, and some of them were quite productive, but the idea that we would stop talking about race just is—is really—you know, is—is ridiculous now that we think about it. Instead, we were entering a period where we were as a nation going to have very animated conversations about race of all kinds and unfortunately some of them were quite ugly.

Obama's approach to talking about race

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MICHELE NORRIS:

When President Obama was elected, there was an expectation that he might lead some sort of national conversation around race. Some of that had to do with the fact that he was a person of color, and most conversations around race are often led by people of color, so perhaps there was a higher degree of expectation around that. What's interesting is that we don't expect the same thing of White politicians, and they too have skin in the game, so there probably should be some parity there but there's not. So there was an expectation that he might lead this sort of national conversation. The expectations might be heightened because of the quite eloquent speech he gave in Philadelphia where he talked with candor and eloquence and honesty about a subject that a lot of politicians don't talk about. I mean, you're often counseled as a politician that's too complicated, try to stay from that conversation. As a man of color, it may have been impossible for him to do that, but I think the expectations around what he was expected to do were heightened and maybe unrealistic. What would a national conversation about

race sound like? Was he going to sit down on you know, on the third Tuesday of March, that we were all going to sit down and have this national conversation? In my experiences—you know, now I spend a lot of time examining race in America and examining issues around cultural identity.

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And we as Americans have a hard time talking about this subject. So we often look to someone else to help us navigate that space, to guide us through that space, and there may have been an expectation that he would be the person to lead that conversation so that someone else didn't have to talk about it. So you know, I'm not gonna talk about this, but I prefer that he would talk about this. And the—the unfortunate—and the unfortunate logic around that- everyone else gets to be a bystander when we're all affected by this, and that the expectation is that one person is going to lead this conversation and that everyone else just gets to watch. It's not really a national conversation. It's that one person is leading this kind of conversation and the—one of the problems around that is that if you're not actually participating in that, the expectation is that things will get better or that things might move forward because of something someone else did and that you didn't have any—you know, any—any role to play in that. It was a difficult path for him to have to try to walk because of those heightened expectations, and because there were perhaps a double standard sometimes, that if he said something, it would carry more weight because he as a man of color was saying that.

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The flip side of that is that he could use that platform, and I think he became more comfortable. I mean, he will say that, that he became more comfortable

over time talking about matters of race. At calling the country's attention to something like the Trayvon Martin killing. One of the more interesting things about the first family and the conversation around race is the casual nature with which they had the conversation that often was missed by people. So people were perhaps looking for him to lead this national conversation and early on there were several pundits, several journalists, several people through critique who were saying that the president didn't talk enough about race; that he didn't seem comfortable talking about race. I thought it was interesting because he seemed to talk about it quite a bit, but not in the way that he did in Philadelphia where he stood in front of a phalanx of flags and said, I'm gonna have a conversation about race now, I'm hope—this is the subject of my speech. But he was talking about his background. Someone asked him about his background. I think it may have been before he actually was inaugurated, and he described himself as a mutt. Not in a denigrating way at all but just saying "I'm a little bit of this, a little bit of that." And it was unusual in that it's not a word that you would normally attach to a president, because of the profile of our presidents has not—that's not been the profile. But it was also a very American statement, because he was talking, he was using a colloquial term to talk about someone who was of mixed parentage, whose—you know, whose parents cross pollinated in some way and brought different cultures together. And we see that as some sort of strange outlier, but actually right now in America, that is a very American story.

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Just noting that in a very casual way and you know, to the point that no one even noticed. There were other small moments where he went to—he was on

the Southside of Chicago, and he was sitting down with a group of young men in an event that sort of presaged the work that he would later do through My Brother's Keeper, where he would create a program that focused on the lives and the fortunes and opportunities of young men of color, and he's sitting in this circle and he's talking to these—these young men and he's talking about his own life and he's talking about his own struggles and his search for confidence and trying to find his way in the world and he said, he said, you know, "I'm you. I'm just like you." And it's just an offhand thing, and I'm—I don't know if I'm quoting him directly, but essentially, he was saying, "I'm—there—there's not so much space between us, I'm you." That's not something that you traditionally have heard a president say to a room full of young black men because there's a gulf between them in terms of experience, in terms of—of lifestyle, in terms of access to opportunities, in terms of so many other things and he was sitting there as the most powerful man in the country and saying, "I am you." And not many people caught it in the moment, caught how—just how seismic that message was. And we sort of understood it on inauguration day and we sort of understood it if you picked up—you know, if you live in Washington, you pick up these—they sell these bookmarks everywhere that have all the presidents and you pick up a bookmark and all the presidents look—ya know, 43 of them and then suddenly there's Barack Obama who obviously looks different. So you note it in times like that but he was saying something that was asking us in the most subtle way to pay attention to a fact of his presidency and talking in a profound way but through very casual language, and often we miss that. And so the criticism was that he never talks about race when in fact if you go back

and look at the record, he was actually talking about it in casual and yet profound ways quite often.

Trayvon Martin

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MICHELE NORRIS:

Americans have a hard time talking about race, and yet we talk about it all the time. But the conversation can be difficult. The media sometimes has a hard time talking about race and trying to figure out how to have this conversation. Some of it is, if you're in the White House, you're just moving so fast, you know. Today it's—it's you know, oil prices, it's saving the auto industry, it's credit default swaps, it's you know, crisis on the Korean peninsula, so you maybe don't have the time to really dig deep and think deeply about this. But it was one of the things that the press corps sometimes had a difficult thing wrestling with. You know, how to participate or lead or even chronicle that conversation. When he mentioned that Trayvon Martin could have been his son, it was a profound statement. Again, I won't say it was a casual statement but it was succinct and it was short. And he was making a point that invited or allowed or in some ways demanded that a press corps that sometimes had a difficult time talking about these issues lean into it and think about it in a more profound way.

Shifting racial culture in America

01:33:48:12

MICHELE NORRIS:

We have a hard time talking about it and yet we talk about it all the time. I mean, I run a program now called the Race Card Project where people share their stories around race and cultural identity that was based on the premise that Americans don't want to talk about race and yet we've collected hundreds of thousands of stories from people who talk about race. It seems to me that people actually want to have the conversation, they're trying to figure out how and where to have it and how to merge into this conversation in a way that feels safe or brave or balanced. The Obama presidency was one of—was maybe the major hallmark around race or one of the most important hallmarks around race in that eight year period, in that decade, if you include the campaign. But there are all kinds of other things that were going on at the same time, and I wonder how many of them were completely ancillary. So his presidency begins at a moment where we are mid-term or we are sort of mid turn, you know, as we are turning the page to sort of a new era in America where the demographics are changing. So that didn't happen because of his presidency, his presidency just began at a moment where we're starting to realize that we are moving closer to becoming a minority—excuse me, we are moving closer to becoming a majority minority culture. We have to think about what it means to be American. Because for a long time the term American, the term All-American, the sort of cultural norm around Americanness was built around Whiteness and everything else was asterisks in some way.

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That the cultural norm was built around being White, and the cultural norms are starting to change, and you see that in popular culture. So it's interesting,

if you watch—if you just did a study of television in the years sort of starting when Barack Obama ran for president, became president. President Obama was living in the White House and to the day that they left, if you just look what happened in terms of let's say advertising on televisions—on television. You go home at night, and you eat dinner and you put your slippers on and you put your feet up and you watch TV and then the advertisements that you see in between the shows that you love, wow. That's a really diverse America that Madison Avenue is serving up every night. I mean you see mixed race couples, and you see same sex couples, and you see people of color that are selling investments and buying cars and soap—I mean there's just this diversity because I guess in the advertising industry, they realized the most important color is green and as the country is changing, they're already reacting to that. So there are cultural changes that you see all around. You see it in music. What's one of our greatest exports right now? American culture. And what does American culture sound like when it's exported right now? It has a heavy bass, right? It has a little flavor to it right now. I mean hip-hop is one of our greatest exports. If you travel overseas and you see great big billboards that are selling Apple products and you know, other products that are made here in America, look who's featured in those advertisements. So did the world react to that or were those two things happening at the same time and—and feeding off and contributing—contributing to each other.

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You know, underneath that or next to that or alongside that is what that means for other Americans, you know, who suddenly feel otherized in a country that maybe felt like it was theirs. So as the cultural default changes,

as the conversation changes, as the demographics of the country change, that change creates vertigo for some people. That change makes some people feel really uncomfortable. And you know, and it's not just you know, people who used to work in the mines or people who work with their hands. It's really—you know, it runs the spectrum. And so their presidency didn't cause necessarily all these changes but it happened at a moment where America regardless would have been going through some of these changes. What if the person in the White House had not been a person of color? Would we have expected that they would have reacted to and responded to that in the same way? Would they have created the kind of culture that we see or would the culture have responded to that presidency in the same way? The fact that these two things happened at the same time, cultural demographic change, technological change which also contributed to this in some way and then having a family in the White House of color was—there was just a really interesting alchemy right there.

Barack Obama's second term

01:38:54:01

MICHELE NORRIS:

There was a saying that went around Washington after the second term that winning the first election was important, winning the second election was really important. You can do a lot more work with two terms. It basically takes a couple of years to get the engine up and running, so from a practical sense, actually having a second term means that you—in terms of legislative victories and having a real impact on policy, the second term buys you a lot of

time to really cement a legacy. If you were asking that in terms of the assessment of this presidency, particularly with regard to race, the nation decided to double down on supporting a family of color in the White House, but that was not the only thing that was happening, but I could understand how people would make that argument, that the second term was even more important in part because the first election helped us understand some of the undercurrents that you saw pretty quickly after President Obama was elected and the headwinds that he was going to face. The decision, you know, that was made and said out loud that you know, by the opposition party that we're going to do everything possible to make sure that this is a failed presidency. That—that they were able to run effectively and successfully for a second term against those headworn—against those headwinds said something important.

Obama's expression of emotion

01:40:39:21

MICHELE NORRIS:

President Obama very quickly developed this moniker no drama Obama, and he was seen as being very cool and very aloof when in fact he—he was very open with his emotions of all kinds. His laughter, you know, that 1000-watt smile that he flashed to great effect but also you know, through genuine expressions of joy. You just sort of saw that. Sometimes politicians are very measured. They live within an emotional range that is pretty tight and you saw, you know, sort of him being goofy sometimes. There are pictures of him playing with kids all the time, you know, on the floor with them. Or some kid

walks in dressed as Superman and he shoots him and the president is reeling back like he was stunned by a stun gun or something like that. He was a president who shed tears. He wasn't the first president to shed tears, but he did so on several occasions without apology. There was something very authentic about that, and I think in some of the moments where it happened, it was cathartic. When kids are shot at their school, we cry. We hurt. We're outraged. He shouldn't have to apologize. He reflected the emotions of the moment instead of deflecting the emotions of the moment for political expediency or because that was expected of him.

Amazing Grace

01:42:32:00

MICHELE NORRIS:

I'm not sure that there's an actual political rulebook, but there are certain rules that are understood if you're in politics at a very high level. You don't wear hats, you don't do certain things. You don't—maybe don't you dance, you don't sing in public unless you have a beautiful voice and there's cause for your—maybe singing along with a hymnal. We had seen that from him before when he had sang a few bars of Al Green, and the room swooned, you know, when he did it. He started those first few bars in—in—in the—in the Black church, there's often a moment where music enters a sermon. Music enters a sort of style of speaking, and it's not quite singing but there is a—there's a sort of a vibrato key, and I thought that that was happening at first, you know that kind of holy ghost moment where the—usually a person in the pulpit sort of enters that space. But he went from that very quickly to—to

singing and it—it was a stunning moment on a couple of different levels 'cause I'm still thinking about this as someone who's covered politics for a long time, whoa, did that just happen? Did he just do that?

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But also thinking, wait a minute, of the moment; Look at the grace that has been demonstrated by the community at Mother Emanuel. That after that travesty, they were immediately talking about forgiveness. And as someone who understands all the complications around race in America in a way that I think President Obama does, understanding that he in his unique role could underscore the role of grace in that moment for a country that was reeling from a heinous act of racial hatred. Anyone who sees that, it doesn't look like it was a political gamble, it doesn't look like it was, ya know, I'm—I am going to do this in a calculated way. It seemed like it was someone who allowed himself in a spiritual setting, in a moment of mourning, to allow the moment to overtake him but in doing so allow the nation, knowing that the nation or maybe the world's eyes are on you, allowing you to play a role as not just commander and chief but you know, comforter in chief in some way, and I think they both have done that time and time again and probably more times than they would have cared to, particularly around gun violence in America.

Desensitized racial discourse

01:45:31:20

MICHELE NORRIS:

I—I run a project. It's called the Race Card Project, and we for eight years, since 2010 have been asking people to share stories about race and cultural

identity starting with six words. And the idea is that you use six words because you have to put a fine point on it. You have to distill your thoughts, your memories, your perspective, your anthem, your triumph, whatever it is, and then we ask people to explain the backstory behind their six words. And it has been an—an interesting taproot to understand America's racial and cultural DNA. So we've now collected enough stories that we've learned quite a bit about things that don't surface necessarily in news headlines. Because in news headlines we're often reacting to the moment of—to the story of the day, to the thing that you know, has captured our attention, usually because there's some conflict or controversy. In this sense, people are—they're setting the agenda, so they're saying this is what's important to me. So sometimes the stories that land in the inbox at the Race Card Project are much more nuanced. They're—they're sort of back burner issues but important nonetheless because that's the story that people choose to tell. And it can be a barometer, so you see things over time. So I like to say it's created a social tree ring, the stories in the archive that help us understand America's lived experience and memory and perspective around race and cultural identity during a really interesting period that's now bookmarked by Barack Obama and Donald Trump. And so we see moments, we see people reacting to Black Lives Matter. We see people reacting to the growth in inter-racial adoption and the growth of blended marriages, economic trends.

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And one of the things that we saw-- people reacting to changing demographics in America and what that meant for their changing fortunes or their change of self and then how that was impacted by the tone and the

rhetoric in the political arena. Was I surprised by some of the things that surfaced with the rise of Donald Trump? Not necessarily surprised because I had begun seeing it through the unique lens that I have. If anything, I don't know if I would say surprising, it was—it was troubling how quickly that sort of discomfort and vertigo turned into something that we started to see with regularity that would have seen—that would have been alarming, unacceptable, ring the alarm bells as loud as you can when you see people using rhetoric around white nationalism, around Nazism, around racial hatred that. It wasn't that it had surfaced, it was that it was suddenly normalized. That we were seeing it and not seeing it attached to something that is unacceptable or something that is troubling as just something that happened on Tuesday and it just shows up on your Twitter feed or and then something else happens and then something else happens that you forget about what happened two days ago because it's happening so often now that we don't even have time to adjust or digest or contextualize it to understand that this is happening with great regularity now, and this is just now part of the political discourse. That is something that did surprise me and that is disturbing and I think should be disturbing in any country that is built on a democracy and that you know, if you pay attention to the words in the constitution, we are drifting—we are drifting right now away from both the language and the ideas behind what those words actually stand for.

END TC: 01:50:00:09