



OBAMA

IN PURSUIT OF A
MORE PERFECT UNION

LESSON FOUR

THE 2008 CAMPAIGN FOR PRESIDENT POLITICS, POWER, AND RACISM

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine the impact of race on politics during Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Students will analyze the ways the campaign and other individuals, communities, and political parties made use of race and racist rhetoric to promote their own political positions and ideologies. Students will also have the opportunity to explore how their own racial and other identities influence and shape how they see political candidates and policies.



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- > What do Barack Obama's presidential campaign and the reactions to it reveal about the role assumptions about race play in American society?
- > In what ways did racial identity emerge as a major theme of Obama's candidacy? How did the narratives around race affect his campaign?
- > How did both Obama's supporters and opponents use and/or exploit race as a political tool or weapon? Were they effective?
- > Does Barack Obama's campaign and election fit into your vision of a more perfect union? If so, how?



LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will:
- > Analyze film sources referencing the 2008 presidential campaign and identify key points in the 2008 presidential campaign where race and racism were used and exploited as political strategy
 - > Use the Venn diagram exercise to illustrate learning about the role of race in the 2008 elections with regard to students, Obama, and America.



MATERIALS

- Listed in order as they appear in the lesson:
- > Equipment to screen film clips and interview threads curated for this lesson
 - > Film Clips
 - > Handout One: "The Race Speech" Film Clip Transcript
 - > Handout Two: The More Perfect Union Venn Diagram
 - > Handout Three: Interview Threads Transcripts



Two
55-minute
class periods



U.S. Government, Civics, U.S. History,
African American Studies



This lesson assumes students are familiar with the structure of presidential elections. It may be helpful to review this infographic: [How to Become President of the United States from USA.gov](#) to help define concepts such as caucuses, primaries, and the general election.

ACTIVITIES



COLORED

“ Racism is always a very convenient tool to use by those who want power. And because racism is so deeply baked into the American psyche, you only have to tap into the vein. ”

— **SHERILYNN IFILL**
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION

OPENING

How Much Does Race Matter in Elections?

Read aloud this exchange between Barack Obama and CBS journalist Steve Kroft. The televised interview took place on February 9, 2007, the day before Obama formally announced his candidacy for president:

STEVE KROFT: *You think the country is ready for a Black president?*

BARACK OBAMA: *Yes.*

STEVE KROFT: *You don't think it's going to hold you back?*

BARACK OBAMA: *No. You know, the — I think if I don't win this race, it will be because of other factors. It's going to be because I have not shown to the American people a vision for where the country needs to go that they can embrace.*



DISCUSS

- > Why do you think Steve Kroft asked about whether the U.S. was ready for a Black president?
- > Imagine yourself hearing this interview before the 2008 election took place. Would you have agreed with Barack Obama's belief that he'd win or lose based on his vision, rather than because of his race? Why or why not?

Take a class poll of the answers to the following questions by show of hands, in chat, or using an online poll function, and write the results in a place you can revisit later in the lesson:

How big a role do you imagine race and racism played in the 2008 campaign and election?

- > Not at all
- > Some
- > A major factor

Would you predict race would:

- > Harm Obama
- > Help Obama
- > Make no difference

ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT

Race Takes Center Stage Around Jeremiah Wright

Introduce the film clip by letting students know they are going to watch a scene from **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** in which conversations about race clearly took center stage during the campaign. During the 2008 Democratic primary, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were the frontrunners (students will learn more specifics about the primaries later in the lesson). At the time this clip takes place, Barack Obama was in the lead. During the campaign, true to his words in the opening exercise of this lesson, Obama had avoided talking specifically about race to keep the focus on his larger vision for America. Then, on February 22, 2008, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article about President Obama's longtime pastor and family friend, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, portraying Wright as radical and anti-American. Subsequently, Fox News and other news outlets broadcast video clips of particularly fiery moments from Wright's sermons.

Some of the clips, shot years before the elections and taken out of context from longer sermons, included statements such as:



“The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing God Bless America? No, no, no, not God Bless America, God Damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America. We have supported state terrorism against Palestinians and Black South Africans, and now we are indignant! Because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back into our own front yards! We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki! And we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye.” - Rev. Jeremiah Wright



DISCUSS PROMPTS

Briefly discuss these quotes from Jeremiah Wright with prompts like:

- > What do you think Jeremiah Wright was referring to in this quote?
- > What is your opinion on what he is saying?
- > Why do you think these comments caused a public outcry about Obama?

The remarks caused enough controversy that the Obama campaign distanced itself from Wright. The uproar continued, and on March 18, 2008, Obama made a speech about race in America. Print and distribute **Handout One, Lesson Four: Jeremiah Wright and the ‘Race Speech’ Film Clip Transcript** and ask students to follow along as they watch the clip, underlining words and ideas that seem important.



FILM CLIPS

> Jeremiah Wright and the “Race Speech”

These clips include excerpts of the speech that Barack Obama made in response to the controversy about Reverend Wright, as well as commentary from his critics and supporters about how the speech came about and how it was received.



DISCUSS

- > Why do you think Obama had avoided talking about race prior to this speech?
- > What stood out to you about how Obama describes the role of race in America?
- > Do his views align with your own? In what way?
- > Does anything in this speech change your ideas about the effects of race on elections?

SYNTHESIZING LEARNING

Handout Two: The More Perfect Union Venn Diagram

Explain that in this lesson, students are going to note the multiple perspectives about race in the campaign. They will use their notes on the diagram to formulate their own ideas about how race influenced the 2008 presidential campaign.

If helpful, use these specific prompts to get students started:

- > **Obama circle:** What have you learned about Barack Obama’s views about the role of race in elections?
- > **You circle:** What have you learned about yourself and your views with regard to race in the 2008 election?
- > **America circle:** What have you learned about the role race and racism play in American culture?
- > **Overlaps:** Add any additional ideas where these learnings overlap.



Teacher Note: If you are teaching the lessons in a series, students will already have this Venn diagram handout.

A CLOSER LOOK

The Story of the Campaign

While the controversy around Jeremiah Wright and the subsequent “More Perfect Union” speech were illustrative of some aspects of how race and racism functioned in the campaign, there were many other interesting aspects to consider. The following film clips and interview threads may be used in several ways:

- > Assign the clips threads in a jigsaw model and have students work together in groups to complete their Race in the Campaign Venn diagrams based on what they’ve learned.
- > Have students use the clips and segments to create a “timeline” of the different ways that race and racism were exploited during the campaign.

Print and distribute **Handout Three, Lesson Four: Clips and Threads Transcripts**. As students watch the Interview Threads, have them follow along on the transcripts, and underline details that catch their attention, and jot down questions and insights that come to mind.

> Interview Thread: Election Strategy — The Primaries

David Axelrod, Valerie Jarrett, and Reverend Al Sharpton speak about the primary against Hillary Clinton.

> Interview Thread: Election Night

Broderick Johnson, Ken Mack, and Cornel West share their memories of election night, 2008.



> Race in the General Election (4:48)

John McCain chooses Sarah Palin as his running mate and racist rhetoric emerges as a result.



Teacher Note: The filmmakers conducted nearly forty interviews to produce **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union**. The full interviews are available in the [Interview Archive](#) on the [Kunhardt Film Foundation website](#). A selection of these interviews, edited together here to create interview threads and aligned to the specific lesson topic, are available for your students’ learning.

SYNTHESIZING LEARNING

The Role of Race and Racism in the 2008 Presidential Elections

Revisit the class polls from the opening exercise to see if the answers have changed:

How big a role do you imagine race and racism played in the 2008 campaign and election?

- > Not at all
- > Some
- > A major factor

Would you predict race would:

- > Harm Obama
- > Help Obama
- > Make no difference

As a large group, briefly discuss students' answers to these questions, focusing on students who changed their votes as a result of what they saw or heard in the film.

Students use their notes and Venn diagrams to prepare a persuasive statement about their opinions on the following questions. Encourage them to acknowledge multiple perspectives in their statements.



DISCUSS

- > Given the complexities of race in America, what role do you think race and racism played in the 2008 elections?
- > What does your study of this election teach you about race in America?
- > What needs to change in order to work toward a more perfect union?

HANDOUT ONE, LESSON FOUR

“THE RACE SPEECH” FILM CLIP TRANSCRIPT

CLIP ONE

CORNEL WEST: Unfortunately, as an American politician, you can't get too close to that kind of prophetic fire [Jeremiah Wright's sermons] or you get burned. So, I can understand Barack in some sense wanting to get a distance as a politician.

BARACK OBAMA: I, uh — These particular statements that have been gathered are ones that I strongly objected to, strongly condemned. Had I heard them in church, I would have expressed that concern directly to Reverend Wright. So, I didn't become familiar with these until recently.

CORNEL WEST: But on a personal level and on a very deep, truthful level, you had to try to teach people that there are voices in our society that are radical, that are not up for elections.

DAVID AXELROD: He called me that night and said, “I want to make a speech. I want to make a speech about race, and I want to put this Reverend Wright issue in context.” And we said, “Okay.” And he said, “And I want to do it no later than Tuesday.” This was Friday.

VALERIE JARRETT: He felt that he owed the American people an explanation, and that they had to hear it directly and honestly from him.

AL SHARPTON: A very painful thing for Obama was dealing with his pastor; very painful. And it was very painful to the community because people were angry because they were trying to act like he threw his pastor in front of the bus.

DAVID AXELROD: We set up this speech for the Constitution Center in Philadelphia on the theory that if you're going to go down, go down on a big stage. The anxiety in the room was palpable. And he turned to me and said, “You know, I'm going to go out there and give this speech, and people will either accept it or they won't.”

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you. Thank you.

DAVID AXELROD: “And if they don't...”

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you. Thank you.

DAVID AXELROD: “Then I just won't be president, but at least I'll have said what I think needs to be said.” He said, “That's worth something.”

BARACK OBAMA: We the people, in order to form a more perfect union. 221 years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and with these simple words launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. The document they produced was eventually signed, but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together. Unless we perfect our union.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: I think what was extraordinary about Obama's so-called race speech is the fact that it happened at all. There was no precedent. I mean, yes, Black people had run for president before, but at this stage in the game, there wasn't a clearly marked road that said, this is how this kind of Black person deals with people trying to disparage him and take him down in the name of race.

BARACK OBAMA: Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country.

DAVID REMNICK: Obama was forced to give a speech on race — he was forced to. He was in trouble.

BARACK OBAMA: This is not to say that race has not been an issue in this campaign. And yet, it's only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

CLIP TWO

BARACK OBAMA: I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy, and in some cases pain. But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than 20 years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith and who, over 30 years, has led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on earth.

BARACK OBAMA: The church contains, in full, the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence, and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the Black experience in America. I can no more disown him than I can disown the Black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my White grandmother; a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world,

but a woman who once confessed her fear of Black men who passed her by on the street. And who, on more than one occasion, has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

JELANI COBB: As opposed to just cutting Jeremiah Wright off immediately or even kind of saying “It’s not possible for me to win,” he does exactly what a professor or a teacher would do in that circumstance, which is step into the middle of it and look at it panoramically and then try to understand it for what it is. Under other circumstances, we would call that a class. In Barack Obama’s circumstance, this is a public address or speech.

BARACK OBAMA: The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through. A part of our union that we have not yet made perfect. We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country, but we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

BARACK OBAMA: The anger is real. It is powerful. And to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races. In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the White community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they’ve been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience. As far as they’re concerned, no one handed them anything. They built it from scratch. So, when they are told to bus their children to a school across town, when they hear an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed, when they’re told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

CORNEL WEST: Now I believe in staying in contact with the humanity of my precious White brothers and sisters, but they need to understand that in a White supremacist civilization, you’ve been the beneficiary of unbelievable privilege and entitlement; that you have a right to justice, you have a right to fairness, but your resentment will never have the same weight, morally and spiritually, as a Black rage who had to come to terms with foremothers and forefathers raped and violated and exploited and lynched. And when he presented that equivalent, it made me upset. I said, “You’re not telling the truth!”

BARACK OBAMA: To wish away the resentments of White Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns, this, too, widens the racial divide and blocks the path to understanding.

CLIP THREE

BARACK OBAMA: The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society, it’s that he spoke as if our society was static, as if no progress had been made, as if this country — a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of White and Black, Latino, Asian, rich, poor, young and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.

JEREMIAH WRIGHT: The Senator came to my home to ask me to stop preaching until after the election. I’ve been preaching this way for 50 years, regardless of who’s running for what office: Carol Moseley Braun, Harold Washington, Barack Obama. That doesn’t change or affect or alter the gospel in any way. He then paid me one of the highest compliments I’ve ever had paid to me. He said to me, “You know what your problem is?” I said, “What’s my problem?” “As a preacher, you have to speak the truth.” I said, “That’s a good problem to have.”

TERRY MORAN: Do you consider yourself a Black man or an American first?

BARACK OBAMA: An American, absolutely.

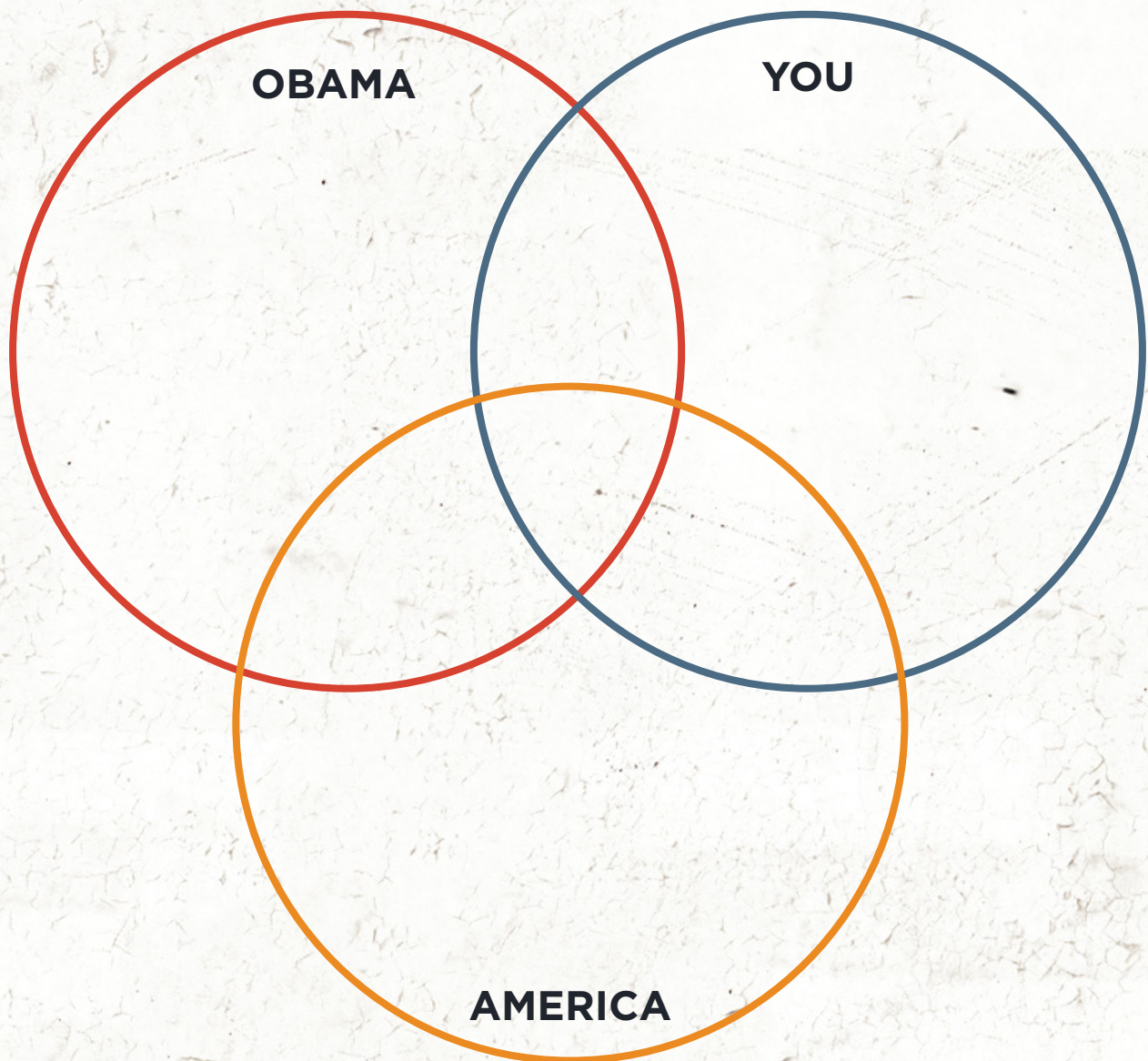
TERRY MORAN: Is there a difference between Black patriotism and White patriotism?

BARACK OBAMA: No, I don’t think so. I mean, what I think is that the African American community is much more familiar with some of the darker aspects of American life and American history. I think that they understand America much less as a marching band playing, you know, John Philip Sousa, and they understand America much more as a jazz composition with blue notes. And I think those are different things. And so, the African American community can express great rage and anger about this country and love it all the same.

HANDOUT TWO, LESSON FOUR

THE MORE PERFECT UNION VENN DIAGRAM

Directions: Use your notes from the opening exercise and the clip to begin filling out the Venn diagram, noting what you learned about your own, Obama's, and the country's views about race in elections. In the middle area, point out where these views overlap.



Keep in mind:

- > What have you learned from this lesson about race in elections and President Obama, yourself, and America?
- > What is Obama's vision of a more perfect union?
- > What is your vision of a more perfect union?

HANDOUT THREE, LESSON FOUR

INTERVIEW THREADS TRANSCRIPTS

THREAD: ELECTION STRATEGY, THE PRIMARIES

DAVID AXELROD
1:27:28:23 - 1:30:18:06

Well, South Carolina obviously — South Carolina is the first Southern primary. The majority of voters who participate in Democratic primaries — in the Democratic primary there are majority African American, but Barack needed White votes as well to win. He wasn't going to get all the African American votes and wanted them [the White votes] because he didn't want to win on that basis. But it was a crucial primary for both us and Hillary Clinton, and Bill Clinton was campaigning in the state the week before the primary. And he was in rural areas appealing to White voters we felt in ways were sort of dog whistles to these voters. And there was a Mason-Dixon poll the Friday before the Saturday primary that suggested that Obama's White support was collapsing, and that's the way the poll was reported. It was an NBC poll so there was all this apprehension about whether in fact our hopes were going to be dashed, that we weren't in fact in a new era where we could attract a multi-racial coalition.

And the next day I was sitting with Michelle Obama, the day of the South Carolina primary. There was nothing to do but wait. I was sitting with Michelle Obama filming some ad material and my Blackberry went off and it was the initial exit poll and I'm looking at it saying, "Oh I can't believe this, this can't be right." And she's just going, "What? What?" And it says, well, we're going to win handily here. And she slugged me and said, "Don't ever do that to me again." But it was a beautiful night.

I mean there were two great moments in that campaign. One was the night that he won the Iowa caucuses. Maybe the most emotional night that I've ever had in politics. It was just a beautiful, beautiful night because of the kind of up-from-the-grassroots nature of the campaign. We had done what people thought was not possible. South Carolina was a beautiful night as well because he got about 30% I think of White votes in the state in addition to a majority of Black votes and built the multi-racial coalition that we had hoped for, completely outstripped everyone's expectations and in that hall the night when he spoke, there were people chanting "Race doesn't matter." Now that was premature and that was more of a hope than a reality. But this was a big moment in the campaign and I think a big moment for the country.

VALERIE JARRETT
01:14:42:10 - 01:16:54:05

Early in the campaign, because our strategy was all hands on deck in Iowa, other than raising money, he

really moved in Iowa. And the theory of the case was if he could win Iowa, then he would be credible not just to people in White America but also people in Black America who were hesitant about his chances of winning. But that strategy came with a cost, and the cost was Black people feeling somewhat neglected. And people clamored to have him show up in their cities and their towns around the country outside of Iowa where there were large concentrations of Black people. And so one of my responsibilities was running interference and trying to explain why you really had to do this with an "Iowa first" strategy. And that it would be almost impossible with time and money for him to do both.

Now we came up with a magic solution, which was, we asked Michelle to go to South Carolina, where she gave an extraordinary speech that really spoke to the feelings in the African American community, the feelings of fear, worrying would he lose, worrying would he be hurt, worrying about what it would mean for future candidates should this wash out. And I remember on the plane on the way to the speech, Michelle was talking about this feeling of fear and she said, "You know, it's like people who cover their furniture with plastic trying to keep it safe." And so out of this conversation, she really came up with this extemporaneous addition to her speech, where she broke it down and everyone in the audience — which was comprised of primarily African American women and all knew about their grandmother's couch — and this sense that she gave them permission by acknowledging their fear but then said, "Look, I have the most to lose. And if I am prepared to face this for the greater good, you know, take my hand and join me in that effort." And so that really was like the magic solution to what was becoming an enormous problem for our campaign, this sense of Black people not feeling as though they were appreciated or safe to invest.

REVEREND AL SHARPTON
01:15:08:20 - 1:17:07:21

Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton, though I disagree with him on several of the legislative initiatives — namely the welfare reform bill and the omnibus crime bill — but when she came to New York after that as First Lady, ran for the Senate, we had developed a decent relationship. But when Bill Clinton came out after the South Carolina primary and tried to dismiss the significance, that Barack Obama who had upset everyone winning Iowa, lost in New Hampshire. So now South Carolina's the next primary and he won. And Bill Clinton kind of, "Well, even Jesse Jackson won that." What are you saying?

And for me being a recognizable New Yorker nationwide to call him to task, they couldn't say he was

playing politics because I'm saying, "Wait a minute, if that's not outright racist, it's as borderline as you can get. What do you mean, even Jesse Jackson won that?" Then when it came out about the whole question of him saying to Ted Kennedy, "This guy used to — could be getting our coffee." Well, he might have meant that he was a political novice but the racial tone of that. I said to myself, if we caught a right-winger or a Republican saying that, we would not say that — that maybe he was talking politics. So I began to look at it differently and was pounding on it because I was offended, I was insulted, and it was interesting because a couple of years later when Caroline Kennedy and I went — and was having lunch, she said that the first time she had heard Barack Obama speak was at National Action Network Convention. So it was full circle that I was defending her uncle standing up for Obama because of the conversation with Bill Clinton.

FILM CLIP: THE GENERAL ELECTION

SARAH PALIN: I was reading today a copy of the *New York Times*.

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: And I was really interested to read in there about Barack Obama's friends from Chicago.

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: Turns out one of his earliest supporters is a man who, according to the *New York Times*, was a domestic terrorist and part of a group —

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: Part of a group that, quote, "launched a campaign of bombings that would target the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol."

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: Man.

NEWS REPORTER: The Palin factor. The campaign that's turned down and dirty. Down in the polls, the McCain campaign has found a new attack dog.

BARACK OBAMA: Senator McCain and his operatives are gambling that they can distract you with smears rather than talk to you about substance.

SARAH PALIN: I am just so fearful that this is not a man who sees America the way that you and I see America.

BARACK OBAMA: They'd rather tear our campaign down than lift this country up. That's what you do when you're out of touch, out of ideas, and running out of time.

SARAH PALIN: I'm afraid this is someone who sees America as imperfect enough to work with a former domestic terrorist who had targeted his own country.

DAVID REMNICK: Even as just a journalist, the crazy emails about how really I got it all wrong, and that Barack Obama was created by terrorists and bomb-throwing radicals. Unfortunately, that crap entered the mainstream. In the name of Sarah Palin. He's pal-ing around with terrorists. This language was — and — and feeling was — is not just some American marginalia over here. People saw it as sufficient enough that it needed whipping up.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER #1: I'm afraid if he wins, the Black will take over.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER #2: He seems like a sheep — or a wolf in sheep's clothing, to be honest with you.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER #3

He must support terrorists. You know, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck. And that, to me, is Obama.

TA-NEHISI COATES: You have to have some degree of optimism and some degree of faith in White America because the majority of the population can already be president. I don't know how you become president without that, right? Or at least at that point, I don't know how you become president without that. But I think also that that faith might prevent you from seeing certain things. The belief in the goodness of White America did not allow you to see that this could actually get really bad.

JOHN MCCAIN: Yes, ma'am. Ma'am, if you're going to walk up like that I'm not going to give you the mic.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER: OK, I gotta ask you a question. I do not believe in — I can't trust Obama. I have read about him, and he's not, he's not, he's a — he's an Arab. He is not — No?

JOHN MCCAIN: No ma'am. No ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that's what this campaign is all about. He's not. Thank you.

THREAD: ELECTION NIGHT

BRODERICK JOHNSON
01:17:18:00 - 01:18:53:11

I was able to get the flight, and I was able to get there in plenty of time to go to Grant Park [in Chicago]. And it's indescribable still. You know, it's one of those moments in life where you just wish you could go back in time and relive it again. You can't. But there were just, you didn't want to have a camera or anything. You just wanted to experience it, and live in the moment. And then talking to my mother about it all, back in Baltimore and hearing how emotional she was, and then myself and thinking, "This really happened, we really did this." There were so many, so many things about it that were so deeply emotional. My wife flew in the next morning, I think it was, and then we went and bought as many newspapers as we possibly could. I think we have a couple hundred still at the house. But that night, it's just indescribable. Indescribable.

And you know what also struck me as I looked at the election returns? We were winning states that a Democrat had not won in a long time. And a Democrat has not won since [as of 2020]. And even states that we didn't win in 2012. The fact that he won Indiana and he won North Carolina, you just were filled with so much optimism about how the country had turned the corner. Not in some post-racial sense, but in some like other thing that's hard to describe, but people really wanted to vote for him, even in states where it was unimaginable. And we'd also run very effective campaigns in all states, no doubt about it.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON
01:59:16:11- 02:02:26:01

Yeah, it's hard to overstate the significance and importance of Barack Obama's victory in 2008. My mother, sharecroppers, a cotton picker's daughter basically, in Alabama. My mother's now 81, 82 years old, and when he won in 2008 — the tears, the joy, the disbelief that this could ever happen in America. That the United States of America — when Maya Angelou would say these yet-to-be United States of America — the cradle, the Latin phrase is E pluribus unum, "Out of many, one." "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." There was a barrage of images, and a combustion of enormous joy that finally, after the blood, and the hate, and the hardship, and the sacrifice, and the enormous suffering. That out of that, this fine young Black man, and his fine young wife, and their two children would be the occupants of the greatest public housing in the world. That the Oval Office would now be darkened, literally and symbolically, by an African American family. It provoked speechlessness. It provoked great disbelief, but joy, overwhelming joy, overwhelming emotions that couldn't be articulated.

I remember I was sitting in the offices of the news outfit that I was commenting on for that morning, and in the greenroom before we went back on again, I was there with Peggy Noonan, and she was commenting as well. And then they all saw my tears, my disbelief. Here I am supposing to be a commentator even though I'm not a journalist, but are you supposed to be a bit dispassionate? No, can't fake it on this day. This is real. This is what it's about. This is what many White people have been able to take for granted, because on 44 occasions you have been able to acclaim maybe to your boredom, to your ennui, that "Ah yeah, another president, okay," but this is a first for us, right? And so that signal moment is so indelibly etched into the collective consciousness of Black people that it spoke to the demons and desires of Black people, to the hopes and frustrations and fears all at once.

02:04:12:08 - 2:05:41:14

And it changed the nation as well. Even those who were hardened, bitter naysayers, or those who didn't think that Black politics made a big difference, and, "Why do you Black people get obsessed with having a Black president? Just vote for a president that will do the right thing," and so on. Some of them even got a chance to see. Or even conservative brothers and sisters to see the outpouring, the enormous hopefulness, because it didn't just help Black people. It brought together the nation. It portended the possibility. It pointed to the enormous possibility that for once we could get this right. That we could bring ourselves together. That we could shirk the irresponsible partisanship that had bitterly divided this country. The fracas we had, the outbursts, and contagion of nastiness, and the biliousness, that was the characteristic moment of American politics. Gone, dismissed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Now comes this political figure, and he brought together so many disparate communities. He gave hope to those who had not had hope for a long time, a voice to those who had lost their voices in the wilderness of American politics, and here this guy sat, and here he was, and it was incalculable, and it brought that sense of hopefulness to this nation.

CORNEL WEST
01:05:55:11 - 1:06:51:23

Well, I remember my feelings when I saw right there on the CNN screen that he won, you know. The tears of so much struggle against a vicious legacy of White supremacy in the history of this nation: slavery, Jim Crow, Jane Crow, lynching, spit on, rebuked, scorned — now you got a Black man in that White House built primarily by Black slaves. That's a moment that I think all of us of all colors who have a care about human beings and the future of American democracy would

feel very, very deeply. I'll never forget that as long as I live — very, very much so. But then the question became, now that we have the success, let's see whether it will be greatness. See, success and greatness are not the same thing for me. Success is being in a position of authority, power, and influence. Greatness is what you do with it.

KEN MACK

01:33:27:03 - 01:36:08:19

Election Night 2008, I went to Grant Park, so I saw his acceptance speech live. But, to tell you the truth, you know, it wasn't unexpected at that point that he was going to be elected. If you looked at the polling ... I — firmly believe that I'll believe it when I see it, right? That there... you know, the, you know, America is a very complicated place, he's the first African American candidate, and it all, of course, in politics it ain't over until people vote. So, I just thought, "Okay I'm not going to say I'm 100% sure," but, you know, it — things looked pretty good; it wasn't an unexpected moment. But it was a great moment. It seemed like the whole country was behind him. I remember waking up that day, flying to Chicago with my wife — we were happy. It seemed like everybody in the streets was happy. Like, we're walking down the streets in Chicago and we see these White Chicago police officers and, you know,

the Chicago police force has subsequently gotten a somewhat-checkered reputation, and even the police were cheering for Obama. He was our guy and he was president. And, if you're in Grant Park, it seemed like America had finally done something significant. I mean, not... not like everything — it's not like race was going to change overnight, but, for somebody like myself, I thought there would never be a Black president in my lifetime. When Barack was elected to the Senate, I thought he would never be president because I thought that America wasn't ready for that. By the time election night came around — you know, obviously this thing, I've had to backtrack on those beliefs, but — In the course of several years, thinking that something's never going to happen in your lifetime. When I grew up, when I was born, segregation was still the law in many states in the United States, and 2008 is a very different world. Even though it was a very different world, I just thought the country wasn't ready for this. So, I thought it was an affirmation of what America could be at its best. America's not always at its best. In recent moments, we've seen America at less than its best, but I felt that night, election night, as a Black man in America, that this is what America could be, this is what it aspired to be, and it was great that Barack seemed to encapsulate that in that moment.