

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Michael Eric Dyson
Author and Professor
September 20, 2019
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 2 hours and 24 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Professor Michael Eric Dyson interview, take 1. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Michael Eric Dyson
Author and Professor

Moving from Detroit to Chicago

01:00:11:15

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Well, I had been kind of an itinerant preacher, an evangelist of sorts, following my academic career. I grew up in Detroit, left in '79, went to Knoxville College, a historically Black college, then left a couple years after that, working in factories, pastoring churches along the way, to Knoxville College to— from Knoxville College to Carson-Newman College, which is a southern Baptist, predominantly white school. Did my undergraduate there,

pastored two, three churches along the way, and then went to Princeton in '85 to get a PhD in Religion. And from there, went to teach for a year at Hartford Seminary, and then, in 1989, went to Chicago, Illinois. And Chicago was a bustling city, you know, a city of broad shoulders in that Sandburgian sense. It was an amazingly vital city, but also one that had tremendous racial possibility and problems, and I moved there in the near immediate aftermath of the death of the first Black mayor of that city, Harold Washington. So, there was still tremendous afterthoughts of him, the after-effect of having the first Black mayor come to Chicago, emerge in Chicago, run that, you know, second city, and it was enormously impressive. The downtown was still extraordinarily bustling, but there was radical division and segregation in the communities. There was radical segregation in the communities. So, you had Black and white rigidly divided, Latinx over here in their communities in Pilsen and so on, Black people on the South Side, West Side, white people in the collar counties and so on and in parts of the city. So, it was an amazingly powerful reflection of so many of the racial possibilities and problems and perils that marked America, and you could see why Chicago had been a laboratory for so many sociologists to study race from Cayton and Drake up to William Julius Wilson and others who were studying it as a laboratory of social possibility, but also rampant social segregation and all of the attendant social problems that came along with it.

Historical context of race, economics, and politics in Chicago

01:02:53:13

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

When you think about it, when King dies in 1968, America is still riven by race, tremendous polarities between Black and white and many others. I mean, the Black-white divide is certainly not the only in a multiracial, multicultural society, you know, with Asian, Latinx, African American, and others. But it has been, the Black-white divide has been the major artery through which the blood of bigotry has flowed throughout the body politic for most of this country's history, and Chicago was a faithful representative of that. On the one hand, remember, Martin Luther King, Jr. had moved to Chicago in '66, got outwitted to a degree by Old Man Daley, the first Richard Daley who was the mayor. When they discovered King was going to move into one of the West Side slums, they went in and had it cleaned up. So, the optics of it weren't as compelling as they might otherwise be when King moved in, but he wanted to dramatize not only the southern variety of segregation but the northern variety of poverty and de facto segregation. It wasn't de jure as it was in the South, mandated by law, Jim Crow driving a stake into the heart of interracial possibility. Up North, it was supposed to be free, and yet, you know, it was enormously fraught with, you know, social segregation and social hardship. I think it was Andrew Young who said that he had never seen, and with Martin Luther King, Jr., such hopelessness and the inability of many of the Black citizens to believe that they could overcome their social plight.

01:04:43:00

So, as bad as Mississippi was, there was a kind of buoyancy and a kind of hopefulness and a kind of resilience, but in Chicago, they faced enormous opposition and some of that was generated from within. It's like tying an

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

elephant to a pole as a child with a chain, making that elephant believe he or she could not move, and then, later on, you could keep it with a thread. And so, there was an internal sense of prohibition, of denial, that had been internalized that King and Young and some of his other acolytes discovered. So, when King dies, tremendous peril, tremendous housing segregation, and in the aftermath of his death, LBJ rushed through legislation for the Fair Housing Act. And Chicago was an exemplar of the radical, rabid segregation of the races and how Black people would continue to face economic barriers to upward mobility. So, in the aftermath of King's death, when you think 10, 20 years later, these are, as you said, the children of those in the collar counties of Chicago and the outer perimeters of Chicago who are resistant to King, who felt ... And King got hit on the head with a rock, famously, in one of his marches and said, "I've been through Mississippi and some of the dire places and stretches of the South, but I have never seen such virulence and such vigorous pushback and such aggressive and hateful resistance from white brothers and sisters than I've seen up here in Chicago." So, the outgrowth of that was, on the one hand, an enormous possibility of forging connections between communities, celebrating them, Polish, Irish, Italian, Jewish, African American, Latinx, and so on. But on the other hand, never the twain shall meet. And Chicago in the '80s was a representation of that. You've got the rise of a rigid reactionary, right wing that has racist possibilities in one sense as precursors to what we saw with the working class and the middle classes that rebelled in the 2016 election with Donald Trump. That stuff didn't grow out of anywhere. It was being nurtured, and it was being preserved on a vine of resentment of ethnic retrenchment among white folk,

and then, the resistance to the inclusion of Black people on the other hand. And Chicago's rampant segregation in its neighborhoods only reinforced that. So, even by the mid-80s in Chicago, you've got enormous and teeming multiracial coalitions, Lakefront Liberals trying to join with progressives within the city and those in the outer counties trying to make a difference for people. But there was still the sense that you couldn't quite overcome some of the barriers, and Chicago was the site of Ebony and Jet in terms of the Johnson Publishing Company, the other George Johnson and Afro-Sheen's hair care product, Regal Theater. So, you saw the proliferation of Black businesses teeming within a segregated world and an ethos of can-do and self-help matched up against ethnic white neighborhoods that were deeply entrenched and resistive to Black people and other ethnics. So, that kind of reality manifested itself in the mid-80s in Chicago.

Dyson's childhood compared to Obama's

01:08:25:22

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

I'm just a few years older. I'm born in '58. Obama's in the early '60s, and we're relatively the same age, within a five-year period, but him in Indonesia and in Hawaii and living a vastly different life with a vastly different landscape with interracial parents, father from Africa, mother from Kansas. And I was born in the inner city of Detroit, the deep inner-city of Detroit with a father who was an automobile industry worker and a mother who was a teacher's aide eventually in the schools of Chicago. So, radically dissimilar in many ways, but similar in the sense that we're born at the tail-end of the

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

Baby Boomer generation. I don't know if Obama quite fits. Maybe he does. At the tail-end of the Boomers, and there was a sense of hopefulness and possibility, what we could do with social change on the forefront ...how we could encompass the ideals of American society, push forth the frontiers of radical social transformation. I was 11 years old when I wrote my first speech and delivered it at 12 before the Optimist Club of Detroit, and the title assigned to us was "This I Believe." And so, I was talking about Martin Luther King, Jr,

01:09:58:18

the transformation of America, and what we could do to look toward a more hopeful future. And I think the last line of that speech I delivered at 12 was, "I hope that one day we will be able to transform our oasis of belief into equality of success." So, it was everywhere around us, and Obama in an interracial relationship, the product of an interracial relationship, certainly had that kind of hopefulness, but of course, some enormous pushback trying to figure out where you fit in, if you're not Black, if you're not white, and what the mixture would mean. Although, we know in America the one-drop rule has often prevailed so that any color represented the fact that one was altogether Black even though his experience mostly living with his white grandparents and his white mother and then living with his stepfather. And then, seeing a broader society, he had a mélange of ethnicities and races that opened his eyes to the possibility of what could happen if we all came together.

01:11:08:06

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

I was in a rabidly segregated Detroit. I went to a high ... you know, all of the schooling I had until I had a chance to go out to, at 16 years old, to an elite, suburban preparatory school, was all Black. My teachers were Black. The students were Black. The principal of the elementary school was white, and so, we got a sense of this is what Black identity is about, and we took a Black universe as the norm. This is what it is, Black excellence, Black teachers, Black striving, Black hurt, Black pain. All of that was together, and so, it gave me a sense of grounding in a worldview that took a Black universe as the norm. When I met Obama and got a chance to interact with him, we went to the same church in Chicago, Trinity United Church of Christ, for a while with an exciting and extraordinarily gifted minister, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. He's often mistreated and misunderstood. He grew up out of a Black theology tradition, was working on a PhD in History of Religions under the great Charles Long, a renowned scholar at the University of Chicago, speaks about seven or eight languages. So, he was an enormously gifted preacher of consequential impact on his community who became a full-time pastor, dropped out of University of Chicago, and used his skills to better the society around him. And it's a shame that his enormous complexity and tremendous giftedness got reduced to an asterisk to his most famous member's career. But anyway, we had a chance to interact and engage with each other and got a sense that we believe many things in common. Although we had a radically dissimilar background to some degree.

01:13:05:23

But that generational connection afforded us an opportunity where we were deeply and profoundly influenced by Martin Luther King, Jr. We weren't part

of that generation, but we were part of the generation that benefited from his enormous sacrifices and the opportunity to somehow become who we were growing out of that struggle and growing out of the sacrifices made by that generation. If the greatest generation for the dominant culture was World War II, the greatest generation for many African American people was that generation of Civil Rights and social justice stalwarts who made the March on Washington possible, who made the Black Freedom struggle possible in the 1950s and '60s and early '70s in this country.

Hearing Reverend Wright speak

01:13:56:12

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Jeremiah Wright was twice named one of the 15 great Black preachers in America, at least one time in Ebony magazine. When you say great preaching, great Black preaching, it may be redundant. The fertility of that tradition is rather remarkable, and Jeremiah Wright was one of the great expositors within African American homiletical tradition. That is homilies or sermons delivered by ministers in pulpits, and Jeremiah Wright was enormously gifted. He had a fluid sense of history. He was deeply entrenched in an African American experience and Afrocentric perspective. The world was grounded in not Europe but Africa and not in terms of white-dominant cultural positions, theologies, and philosophies, but African American moral, ethical, and philosophical reflections. So, the wisdom traditions of Black people, the struggles in secular culture, the music of that society, he was quite conversant with all of that, and he brought that to bear in the pulpit.

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

Tremendous voice, tremendous insight, he was a musician. He could play the piano and organ. He had a sense of the musicality and tonalities of speech, quite a range in terms of his physical articulation, and also, a man deeply rooted in the politics and culture of African American society and brought those to bear in criticizing racial injustice and social inequity in the society around him. So, he wanted to translate James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore,

01:15:39:19

and other philosophers and theologians and ethicists, William R. Jones and the like, translate Black theology broadly into Black preaching because there was a divorce and divide between the highfalutin theology that was being generated in African American culture. Even that theology that might've appeared to be arcane or esoteric or rigorous or systemic in a way that wasn't accessible to everyday people, he translated all of that tremendous theology into serviceable theories and homilies that gave Black people inspiration and a sense of how to proceed in terms of fighting for social justice. So, that was his mien. That was his shtick, so to speak. That was his metier. That was his forte, and he was able to do so in, one, a wide audience. As I said, Ebony magazine named him one of the 15 great Black preachers in America, and I think he came in, if they ranked it, kind of number two after the great Gardner Taylor. So, he was highly regarded, a rhetorically sophisticated man, and to be in his pulpit was remarkable. I preached there, but also, to be a member of the church and to be able to absorb on a weekly basis that kind of steady diet of high intelligence, profound Afrocentricity, theological sophistication, and the desire to transform the lives of everyday

people by using their songs, their witticisms, their wisdom, their everyday experiences as grist for his theological and sermonic mill.

The impact Reverend Wright had on Obama's political career

01:17:21:01

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

There is no doubt that Jeremiah Wright helped to establish the religious authenticity of his parishioner, Barack Obama, because remember, Obama doesn't grow out of a Black, religious tradition. There might be some great baptist churches in Hawaii, but not many African American religious acolytes congregate there in mass. So, when he came to Chicago, he got a real dose of that Black tradition of preaching and singing and the kind of ecstatic orality and the kind of combusive and vehemently visceral engagement with the truth. The body invested, the lungs invested, the soul invested, the emotions stimulated. He got a sense of that when he came to Chicago, and Obama was quite practical about the choice of a church, right, which is the one that gives me the greatest entrée into these communities as a community organizer and also as a Black man interested in kind of reconnecting with some of his Black roots and then stimulating them in many ways. And Trinity United Church of Christ was an ideal bed for such activities in a tremendous womb with an incredibility elastic heart and soul that gave him and afforded him the opportunity to engage; great choir, great preaching, upwardly mobile Black communities that are still committed to struggling and working-class Black people. It was an ideal place, and it gave him an authentic dose of that experience and inculcated him and included him in a very serious way that

allowed him to feel it as an organic part of his growth and evolution and development. And not just utilitarian, not just to use it for particular purposes of politics or to do a better job at organizing, but it gave him a sense of identity and a kind of at-homeness with the Black experiences that, in one way, had been foreign to him because he hadn't been raised in and reared in the kind of rich tapestry of Black identity that you find in a Black church.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

01:19:54:06

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

When you think about the early '90s, when Obama is emerging as a figure within Chicago, going to Harvard Law School after discovering that being a community organizer wasn't going to fulfill the ultimate trajectory and arc of his own moral and social vision ...and then reemerging on the ground there to do serious work, the national scene was quite intriguing because the debate, or at least one of them, that was being had within progressive circles in terms of race was whether Martin Luther King, Jr's birthday might be celebrated as a national holiday. And there was a tremendous push. Stevie Wonder writing a song. John Conyers introducing legislation and others and pushing for the recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr, and it wasn't simply the fact that this would be the first holiday named after a Black person and then recognizing that there was tremendous social and civic space dedicated to that remembrance, but it was about honoring the life of a man who made America better. His death certainly transformed America.

01:21:14:00

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

It was in defense of poor Black people that he died in Memphis, Tennessee, but he really died for the possibility that American democratic principles, small D, could be realized in American society, that the things and ideas that America pushed for claimed that it was committed to the ostensible goals and aspirations that governed its history that really fed its politics would become true. And Martin Luther King, Jr. was a linchpin in the realization of these ideals. And so, Black people were determined to recognize his worth and his meadow and to recognize his commitment to America. After all, when he lived, he was called the most dangerous negro leader in America by the second in command and the FBI. He was seen as a person who would thwart democracy, not realize it, as a person who was a roadblock to the best ideals of this nation, not it's sure vehicle. So, in that sense, there was a fight over the interpretation of King's past to make sure that it would be the basis for a future appreciation for who this man really was.

01:22:24:09

So, you got all those forces; Black civic forces, Black social forces, Black entertainment communities, and Black civil rights organizations, Mrs. King, his widow, at the forefront of that, fighting for the recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. You got states denying it. I think Governor Mecham in Arizona and others were some of the last holdouts, and some people would split the King birthday with the recognition of Robert E. Lee. So, there was always fraught territory and tremendous tension over King's identity and King's politics and King's place in symbolic presence, but he certainly was a tap source for so much that was good and powerful in America, but also the pushback against him. And eventually, when Ronald Reagan signs that

legislation and gives that catty remark about, "We'll see," whether Martin Luther King, Jr. basically was a communist when the papers are released in 2027.

Political and cultural changes in the 1990's

01:23:32:12

The kind of, you know, sense of uppity presence that King betokened and the kind of catty resistance that Ronald Reagan, in his own way, gestured toward told all you needed to know about America in the early '90s. Jesse Jackson at the helm, having run twice ... at the helm of African American social struggle and political struggle having run twice for the presidency in '84 and '88 to really live out part of the destiny of a Martin Luther King, Jr. in the way in which it transformed racial politics. But in the '90s, the pushback, the white resistance, the white resentment, the reenaction– the reenactment of a kind of coalition that was part of, you know, the racial resistance of the '60s, all that stuff was coming to bear. Then, you had the big culture wars going on in the late '80s and early '90s where people are debating, "What's part of the canon?" People are writing books, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Oh, my God, multiracialism and multiculturalism are a problem, and if you start including Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, now seen as stalwarts of American literacy. No human being claiming to know or be about the serious literary tradition of America can ill-afford not to understand *Invisible Man* or *Beloved* or *The Fire Next Time*. But then, there was huge debate. Does Toni Morrison deserve a Pulitzer Prize? People had to have a committee to argue for that long before she won the Nobel Prize.

James Baldwin had fallen out of favor, now to reemerge as the voice of America's conscience. And so, all those fights were going on, the King birthday, multiculturalism in America, the cultural wars, which were not simply about race. They were about left and right, progressives, liberals. Arthur Schlesinger, who had worked with John Kennedy and something with Lyndon Baines Johnson, was now part of a liberalism that was askance and skeptical about this new racial development and multicultural formation. So, it wasn't just left/right. There were old style liberals who were skeptical here tossing in with conservatives, and radicals and progressives getting together in force to talk to each other. Very interesting times.

Bobby Rush

01:26:08:06

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Yeah. Well, you know, Bobby Rush is a beloved man, was then, is still now. A Black Panther, a man who is closely connected and twinned to Fred Hampton, a young revolutionary who lost his life, what, 20, 21 years old, in Chicago, essentially set up and murdered by the FBI and the local police complicity there. And so, Fred Hampton and Bobby Rush were heroic figures. And I think it was Bobby Rush who called Jesse Jackson to make sure he could turn himself in to protect himself against the kind of vicious reactionary, racist forces that were coming together within and beyond the FBI and other police forces. And so, Bobby Rush was beloved, had won his seat, and when Obama came to town and then had the unabashed temerity to challenge Bobby Rush, who are you? A lot of Black people, "This ivy league

person, he's not real. Who's your mama? Who's your daddy? What's your background? What's your weird way of talking? What is that weird name you've got? You're going to come in and challenge our beloved Black Panther, Bobby Rush?" And Obama girded up his loins and got his grits together, as they used to say back in the '60s, and tried to make a real push and was not easily dissuaded or discouraged from doing what he was doing, but it was a resounding defeat, similar to the kinds of tensions when Cory Booker ran against Sharpe James in Newark, and who was this ivy league young guy?

01:27:56:21

And then, don't miss the light versus dark tensions there with Cory versus Sharpe James, you know. Shades of difference come with shades of color within Black America. Colorism: the lighter and brighter you are, the more you're seen to be closely connected to, unconsciously, the white society and therefore more legitimate, and the darker you are, society's more skeptical about you, the more kinkier your hair is and the like. And so, some of those tensions were there with Obama, some generational stuff, but mostly that inside, outside, ivy league versus hood versus neighborhood activist, and even though Obama is a community activist in his background, having gone to Harvard, you know, there's skepticism. Because Black people ain't going to dig you just because you're Black. You've got to prove it. What are your bonafides? What have you done? What have you committed to? What kind of sacrifice have you been willing to make? Are you just another comer and a climber using our community to further and boost your own political aspirations? So, all that stuff was out there, but to his credit, Obama put it out there, and with his resounding thumping at the polls, didn't give up. Was he

dissuaded? Sure. Was his tail between his legs? For certain, but he regrouped and figured out a way to make a comeback, but it was a resounding defeat, and a lesser person might've taken that as the ultimate referendum on his career, but not Barack Obama.

Obama's 2003 Senate election

01:29:37:20

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Yes. I think it was for a local expo for a radio station, and I was the keynote speaker. And they came to me saying, "Hey, can you let this guy, Obama, he's running for the senate?" I said, "Oh, yes. Of course. I support this young man like he's my son," and he's like three, four years younger than me. And I had seen Obama at church of course, interacted with him from time to time, and it was a very small crowd compared to his later crowds, right? But it was a big crowd in terms of the local organization of Black folk who were gathered together at this expo thinking about economic and social justice, and entrepreneurial activities and possibilities. So, it was a nice, big audience for that Barack Obama. Later on, it might've been minuscule to his thousands, but there were a good number of people there. I gave the 'rousements, as they say, and I gave him a rousing introduction, "This is going to be the next United States senator in America, a remarkable young man, a powerful figure who embodies our liberation tradition, and now, he has the possibility of going on to statewide office and representing us in the nation's capital to do a great job," and so on and introduced him there. And of course, he was very grateful and very gracious. He's always been that kind of hail-fellow-well-

met. It's like Jimmy Stewart in Black skin, you know, not bumbling but sort of in the sense of intelligence bumbling, though, kind of watching his words and always being conscious. When people tell me about, "Why he's always um and um," because he's been conscious from day one. He's Black in a white world, whiter than other Blacks in a Black world in terms of pedigree and genetic association and familial commitments and identity.

01:31:41:12

So, he's always kind of judging his words, trying to figure out how do I get along, how do I fit in? What do I do to make both my entry and exit? So, he had all that stuff going, and it's kind of charismatic, and it's kind of nice, self-deprecating but assured of who he was with a vision, very specific in particular and able to tick it off. And he's a tremendous speaker, but I tell people, Obama within American politics was an A plus given the history and the litany of speakers we've had, you know, the great ones, John F. Kennedy or Bill Clinton. And I said that this guy is going to go far, I think. There was a convergence of some very unique situations and circumstances that, with the downfall of the senator who was there in Chicago and with his rise, and then, later on, they figured out to get some outsider to run against him, I felt he had a pretty good chance to do well, but it was the instant charisma of his vision and his possibility of narrating what that was, and his ability to communicate that to an audience. And he had learned his lesson from the Bobby Rush defeat. He had learned his lesson in terms of approach and understanding and humility and how to get along with people and how to convince them to come along with him, and I think those things showed that day as well.

Obama's 2004 DNC Speech

01:33:13:00

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Yeah, it was pretty remarkable. I was there at the convention, and it was riveting, electrifying. You know, It was- it was comparable to King standing at the sunlit summit of expectation in 1963 at the March on Washington where he identifies a golden thread of the American dream and weaves it into a tapestry of American democratic possibility. Now, I'm not saying that the 2004 speech measured up to the I Have a Dream speech. In terms of rhetorical eloquence, though, it was eloquent, or the devices, oratorically, that were deployed, King is a master orator of the 20th century, but it did have an electrifying effect in that same way and kind of coming out of nowhere. For those who had not known King, except for the bus boycott, in some of the stuff he did in Birmingham and before in '61 in Alabama, his real coming out to the nation was in '63 with that speech when the globe was able to consume what he was saying. John F. Kennedy had been suspicious and skeptical of King and didn't want the march to go on, and then, when the leaders of the march met with Kennedy afterward, "I have a dream, too." So, you know, he won him over through that rhetoric, and Obama won America over. "There's not a Black America or a White America. There's the United States of America," right? There's not a blue or a red. There's the United States. I mean, that was an ingenious refrain that allowed him to encapsulate in brief rhetorical scope and powerful moral arc. His own understanding of what the possibility was when we all came together, and it was remarkable. It was well-received. He came out of nowhere to become a star overnight,

and it was great to observe, but it was ingenious in its ability to summarize Obama's background. He talked about his father and his mother and his grandparents. He spoke about his own backdrop, the backdrop of his own development, his own appreciation for the various cultures that nurtured him. It was clear to see to anybody else that he was a Black man, but he was a different kind of Black man, and this was the announcement that this is not, though they are enormously important, Jesse Jackson, Reverend Al Sharpton, stalwarts of the Civil Rights Movement, but those who were perceived to be, necessarily so, as people who could channel Black anger to express Black grievance to realize Black progress.

01:36:05:00

With Barack Obama, there's a different moment here. Barack Obama's not a Black leader, he's a leader who's Black, right? Jesse Jackson is an African American leader. Al Sharpton is an African American leader. Barack Obama is an American leader who happens to be Black. Not happens and incidental because of his lack of awareness of who he is as a Black man, no. It's his position. As an American politician, his goal is to represent the best interest of the entire nation from a particular position and standpoint as a Black man but broadening out, not only what that Blackness might mean, but how it might also encompass and include all of America. So, there was a tremendous that was evident that day in that speech that here's a Black guy, an American leader who happens to be Black, who can use the resonance of that tradition to really ally it with our own goals and aspirations in America, and that was a tremendous coming out party for Barack Obama.

Black politicians that came before Obama

01:37:11:01

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

When you think about the traditions of Black people running for president, you think about the great Shirley Chisholm, of course, who pioneered the path, a resilient, forceful, unbossed, Black woman who was determined to use her Caribbean background and her Black commitments and her feminist ethic to really express a desire to be president of the United States of America and to really bring a kind of zesty and informed understanding of what it meant to be a citizen of the United States to bear in her presidential run. So, she was a pioneer, cleared the ground, and there were others, of course, Carol Moseley Braun, who ran afterward, the Reverend Al Sharpton. But the greatest predecessor that Barack Obama had was Jesse Jackson. Jesse runs in 1984, as a result of people, "Run Jesse, Run!" I can still remember being a student at Knoxville College when Jesse came there on Easter Sunday morning and preached about an extended crucifixion, right? Tall, good looking, in his '40s, an amazingly charismatic man with the full panoply of rhetorical gifts that are the province of Black preachers, along with the kind of political savvy of our best politicians, Adam Clayton Powell earlier, William Gray later, Maxine Waters later than that, but he brought to bear the charisma of the pulpit and of the political circle. And so, in '84, he did that, but in '88, he really stepped it up. He changed the rules and the laws, right? The rules especially when it came to how votes were counted. You know, it used to be a winner take all. He challenged that from '84 and '88. Proportionality became critical, and without that, Barack Obama would

never have beaten Hillary Clinton because had the old laws prevailed, winner take all, then Hillary Clinton might well have been, that first time in 2008, the winner of the presidential sweepstakes for the Democratic party.

01:39:38:13

So, all of those figures though, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Carol Moseley Braun, were part and parcel of a kind of revolutionary Black social tradition that politically expressed itself rooted in these Black ideals, these Black norms, these Black practices, primarily shaped by those commitments. Barack Obama had that and had a sheen of it, a patina of it, but more than that, the substantive engagement with that tradition, but he really resonated in a more transcendent way ...in a way that was informed by a broader sweep of the American possibility because his own life was the product of that. He couldn't have the kind of anger, the grief, the hurt, the episodic resentments that dotted the landscape of Black American politics for the most part because that wasn't his experience. He didn't feel, in a native fashion, in a naked, raw, visceral reaction to the barriers that were imposed upon him. He didn't have that kind of existential angst as a result of being denied things and outright treated in a racist fashion, in a consistent way, in a community that was grieving because of its lack of opportunity. He didn't have that. That wasn't his backdrop. His backdrop was Hawaii, Indonesia, multiracialism, overcoming, trying to figure out how to keep Black and white separated ... I mean, the Black and white which had been separated brought together, how to keep them both happy, how to speak to their innate interests. So, his own instinct was nurtured on the vine of an appreciation for how America could come together. That's fundamentally different than the

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

grief and the anger and the resentment and the hurt and the pain that were transformative in that Black political tradition that was represented by Jesse Jackson and the others. Barack Obama was a new thing, a tertium quid, maybe a third thing. He combined the politics of Black grievance with the politics of American possibility into the politics of American hopefulness, and hope as the predicate for transformation. Now, the irony is Jesse Jackson is the one who said, "Keep hope alive."

01:42:05:05

Obama kept hope alive, but he joined the hope of Jesse Jackson to the hope of Hope, Arkansas of Bill Clinton. So, he gave an interracial pedigree to hopefulness and used it in a way that was especially uplifting. So, he was different. He didn't remind America of the Black grief and hurt and of the pain of the past. Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and others would appeal to that tradition and talk about that pain, but they couldn't help it. Even if they didn't speak about it. America was reminded of it in their bodies and in their very visages, in the way in which they expressed themselves. Obama didn't have that baggage, didn't have that burden, didn't have that message. And so, he overcame the resentment and hostility of white people or of the skepticism quietly articulated in a way that was quite remarkable. Think about it. The Bradley Effect is so called because Tom Bradley, who was the great mayor of Los Angeles, a Black man, ran for statewide office as governor, and a lot of white people, "Oh, yeah. We're going to vote for him. Oh, yeah. He's going to be great. Yes. Yes," and got to the polls and Bradley lost and lost convincingly.

01:43:21:01

And people were like, "What happened?" Well, white people are loathed to say that they're going to vote against the Black man when, indeed, they have reservations. With Obama, the early fears about the policy of the Bradley Effect and the effect of it kind of died down because he was a different kind of Black politician. He was a politician who happened to be Black. He was an American politician who spoke to the interest of working class white people, of middle class white people, the aspirations they had. He spoke in their language, a Black style wedded to white, political possibility and hopefulness, and that combination gave Barack Obama a tremendous leg up. So, even though he appealed to and pulled upon a tradition of a Jesse Jackson or an Al Sharpton, a Shirley Chisholm and others who had run, he owed a great debt to the style, the cool, calm engagement with the broader community from Hawaii in America, in the heartland in a way that American white people were able to identify with him, not all of them but enough of them to make a difference, enough of them to relieve the worries and fears of the Bradley Effect coming into play. So, his difference was he spoke with a Black authority, with a Black style to a dominant American culture that felt in his body and in his language an identification that could overcome some of the historic barriers that a Jesse Jackson or an Al Sharpton could never overcome.

2008 presidential election

01:45:06:11

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

First of all, Black people didn't support Obama en masse until he won Iowa because Black people are practical. We don't want any symbolic politics. We love Jesse Jackson. In '88, he really got, what, seven, eight, nine million votes. So, that was tremendous. That's more than symbolic. That was substantive, but we need more of that. We're no longer interested in symbolic politics run as a reaction to white supremacy, run as a candidate who will protest. No. We want real people who are able to really win. And with Obama, after he won Iowa, Black people were like, "What's that? What his name? Barack Olberman? What's his name? Yeah. Yeah, he's good. He's like, really good." And so, he earned it, right? The old-fashioned way. Shoe leather, meeting people, winning at the polls, and Black people are like, "This man could really win." Now, he looks like a genius. Before, he was a candle in the wind with a long shot run for the presidency. I mean, after all, Hillary Clinton was darn near knighted at the beginning as the heir apparent and the person who would most likely take the nomination, and it was her turn. She had waited as a woman in this country. Her turn because patriarchy and the vicious politics of toxic masculinity had prevented the flourishing of women. So, people felt this is her turn. This is the time to recognize, but Obama swooped right in and figured out, "Nah, it's kind of my time. This is my destiny. This is what the fates have delivered." And so, Black people were skeptical, "If he runs, and he wins, somebody's going to kill him." His wife had to address that he could die. As a Black man in America, he could die walking across the street or, God forbid, die at the hands of police. So, she helped to allay some of that fear. Black people were very skeptical. Any Black man or woman, but especially man, given the patriarchy, that continues to dominate, any man

that rises, boy, it's going to be tough, and white folk are going to be pissed, and you're going to be vulnerable, and it might not work out. So, yeah, those fears, on the one hand, and then, is he going to sell us out? Is he really going to be on our side? What's he going to do? There was concern. Is he going to represent us? Is he going to take our issues seriously? What does he know about us? We don't really know him. We like him. He's really smart. He's good looking. He's got a beautiful wife. She's really sharp. We trust her. I mean, a lot of the good will that Black people had for Obama early on was won by Michelle Obama.

01:47:47:17

She was really the secret weapon, South Side Chicago, sho'nuff can't be Miss Black Woman, pedigree equal to his, undergraduate Princeton, law school at Harvard. He was undergraduate at Columbia, law school Harvard. So, those were some ivy league elites who joined together and joined forces, but she was keep it real from the hood, Black authenticity in her genes, in her bones, in her pedigree. And so, she gave him, along with his association with Trinity United Church of Christ, a real keyed Blackness, a real entrée into authentic Blackness. But Black people were skeptical, and Black leaders were kind of resentful because he kind of did an end-run around Black leadership. Most Black people who rise in Black communities have to come through and kiss the ring of the Black political dignitaries and potentates. Obama leapfrogged over them. One of the great things about not being beholden to them is that he didn't have ask them for certain kinds of permission. Now, he was smart enough to go to Selma and to identify with Selma where the great crossing of the bridge gave Black people the right to vote symbolically, and he

understood his alliance with John Lewis who was on Hillary's side because he knew the Clintons but then converted him. That was a big moment. It became uncomfortable for Black people to explain, as political leaders, why they weren't with Obama. So, it's not that they swayed the people to support Obama. Obama's love among the people swayed the leaders to come along. So, Obama had a tactical advantage. You're here because the people have forced you to be here, because they see in me a reflection of their goals and aspirations.

01:49:38:05

Now, he wasn't cheeky or nasty, but he was conscious of the fact that he didn't have to do or to die. He didn't have to bow down. He didn't have to genuflect before the altar of those, kiss the rings of those potentates, even though he understood he needed their support in each city, especially. So, he understood. He started focusing on Black leadership at the local level, at the statewide level. He didn't have to go to the national authorities and figures, though he wanted them on his side. He understood that it was the people on the ground and the people who would be in those local neighborhoods. So, it created some resentment and some resistance and some skepticism, and there had been a tension between him and Jesse Jackson. You know, Jesse Jackson with the "cut his nuts off", that's locker room talk. That's not literal desire, although people played it to the hilt. It's sad and tragic that the Obama's and Jackson's have not quite come together. I think Santita Jackson, the daughter of Jesse Jackson, is the godmother to one of the Obama children. And so, obviously, there was a close connection and a close tie between those families, and Jesse Jackson mentored, to a degree, the young Barack Obama.

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

Barack Obama came to him and came to his home and of course, sought to bow down before the throne. You don't come to Chicago as a Black person politically and not engage with Jesse Jackson. So, there was that kind of recognition of due respect, but once he emerged as a national figure, and Jesse Jackson expressed the desire to cut his nuts off, again, locker room discourse, an unfortunate slip of the tongue that he did not mean for public consumption, but nevertheless, it became public, served as the predicate for the distancing of Jesse Jackson. And really, in one sense, it was a gift to Barack Obama because now, he didn't have to explain why he was keeping Jesse Jackson at a distance. He would've done so anyway. He would've found a way to not identify with Jesse Jackson so radically that it would discourage people from identifying him as an independent political force. So, in one sense, the slipup of Jesse Jackson was a gift to Barack Obama. Now, he ain't gotta explain it because everybody understands if a guy's trying to cut your testicles off, you don't owe him obeisance. You don't bow down before his throne. You don't bring him into your inner circles. Even though, after that faux pas, Jackson was still being used by the Obama camp because they were trying to figure out a way to still make good with him, but it was never the same after that. And it was symbolic of what happened with Barack Obama and many Black leaders. Let's remember, when Barack Obama got into office, he didn't meet with the Congressional Black Caucus for nearly two years, maybe a little bit more than that. So, there was always an interesting arm's length relationship between Barack Obama and Black political figures in this country.

Hurricane Katrina

01:52:51:17

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Katrina was a devastation not only physically, not only in terms of natural forces, but in terms of racial forces. It revealed both that we were incapable and inadequate in response to the social distress that would be occasioned by natural disaster, but the racial fallout. I think it was President George Bush said that the storm was indifferent to race. It may have been indifferent to race, but it wasn't indifferent to the positions of Black, and brown people, and native peoples, and Vietnamese people versus white people; people who could afford to live higher and better were not as vulnerable to those who were more in the storm's path. So where you lived in the storm's path was determined by preexisting economic conditions. So even there, there was a racial hurricane that attended the natural disaster of Katrina. Many people said "look it was an act of malice. It was passive indifference" and the like President Obama suggesting that. And to a degree we can understand that he was then a senator. And I think Obama's reluctance to really indict George Bush and others for the kind of racial indifference to African American people. The famous, maybe infamous line of Kanye West "George Bush doesn't care for Black people." That was the sentiment of many African American people. When you see people stranded on their rooftops. Dying in polluted waters or looking for food and called looters where white people were searching for sustenance and survival. Obama's racial politics were clear even there. The reluctance to call a spade a spade, so to speak. The reluctance to indict a government for its racial failures, and the disinclination

to tag somebody racists, or to hold them accountable under the umbrella of race because that might not be the most productive fashion. So I think that Obama's hopefulness and optimism, as well as his ability to focus on a kernel of a problem, in a way to be helpful that avoided race was revealed in his response there.

A lesson from Chris Rock

01:55:23:08

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Yeah, we were at Oprah's magnificent home in Santa Barbara. That's worth a documentary itself, but there were the Hoi Polloi and the Black elite there. The actor Hill Harper, Tyler Perry, Eric Holder who would soon, in that administration, become the first Black Attorney General, and Dr. Sharon Malone his wife. There were all kind of folk there. Stevie Wonder singing, but we were at the after party. The little dinner after the great fundraiser, and Chris Rock, and I, and Obama are huddled up in a corner and talking...and it was pretty remarkable, and amazing, and Chris Rock tells Obama, "You know, my daddy used to tell me you can't, when you're fighting white people," making the analogy of a boxer, "you can't beat them. That is you can't outpoint them. Like at the end of the day, 12 rounds Obama 67 and McCain 65 on points." He said, "You can't beat him, but you got to knock them the hell out," and he told the story, that he has since repeated, of the great fight between Larry Holmes and Gerry Cooney. The great white hope, the boxer. And he says "Larry Holmes is just whipping him, pummeling him, just beating him to death, blood flowing everywhere. A kind of biblical catastrophe visited

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

upon Mr. Cooney.” ...and he says, “he finally TKOed him. That is Mr. Holmes, and Mr. Cooney, and of course won the fight, but when they went to the cards,” he said, “before the TKO, before the knockout Gerry Cooney was ahead.” He said, “that shows you. You can’t simply outpoint them, because it won’t be fair.” And he was telling Obama basically, is that many things that are otherwise fair to a Black candidate, or a Black person in America would suggest that they could win, they could overcome, they could do it a way that didn’t have to be dramatic or demonstrable in rather exaggerated terms, but he said, “Nope. When it comes to Black folk in America, but especially politics, you can’t outpoint them. You got to knock’ em out.” And I remember Obama flashed that mega kilowatt smile in acknowledgement of the wisdom of Chris Rock, and I’m always reminded of this, because I’ll see Obama quote, or I saw Obama quote Chris Rock when he was president. And he would quote a part of Chris Rock that was critical of Black people. Chris Rock said, “Black people always want to be celebrated for some stuff they should do.” Like, “I take care of my kids,” He says, “you expletive, expletive, expletive, you should take care of your kids! Nobody going to give you any kudos for that!” So Obama will quote that, but he won’t quote the Chris Rock that told that story about having to whip white people, and he won’t tell the story of Chris Rock saying that when he said, “Well, who’s more racist? Well, Black people. Why? Because they’ve been more mistreated.” The hate, the hurt, and the pain, and even if you disagree with the language of ascribing racism to Black people; the point that Chris Rock is trying to make is that the grief, and hurt, and pain that Black people have endured render them a certain kind of way, and Obama misses out on all of that Chris Rock wisdom. But it did remind me that

we huddled up in that corner, and Chris Rock gave him a lesson that I don't think Obama forgot.

Election night 2008

01:59:16:09

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

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 was- 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.

02:01:33:00

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 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. And the crying that Jesse Jackson manifests in that Grant Park, and I was there as well. I was there when it was announced on a different television. That's when Obama was inaugurated that I sat there with tears in my eyes and couldn't believe it with Peggy Noonan, but when the event was announced I was working for yet another media outlet, and it was inexpressibly great. And to see Jesse Jackson in the stands crying, and people thought "Oh those are crocodile tears, you said you want to cut his nuts off." They missed the point. That was Jesse Jackson's -- by the way -- legitimate disagreement with Barack Obama over using the rhetoric of Black respectability to try to discipline and talk down to Black people. Especially his Father's Day speech where he said, "Any fool can have a baby, you've got to be a man to raise one," speaking to Black people in a way he would never speak to white people. So Jesse Jackson is responding from his gut. Yes, the language is unforgivably tart, and corrosive, and corrupting of a certain kind of moral crudeness, but it was motivated by a deep and profound love for Black

America. So when he's sitting there crying, he's thinking about Martin Luther King, Jr. dying in his sight in 1968. Could we ever believe when King died in '68, 30 years later, that we would have a Black president of the United States of America. Virtually inconceivable. And that's why the tears are streaming from his eyes, and from my mother's eyes, and from millions of Black people around this country.

02:04:12:00

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.

Resistance to Obama

02:05:45:12

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Now we know it didn't last long. We know that on the very night of his inauguration, Newt Gingrich and others are trying to figure out a way to make him a one-term president. We know that Mitch McConnell was not devoted to making sure that he could work with this man to forge a connection that would've given the world a sense of what is possible when Americans agree, even if they disagree politically, that they agree that the nation is bigger than their partisanship, than their political affiliation, than their parties. Instead of that, instead of embracing that hopefulness, he chose the lonely, bitter, nasty way of rejecting Obama outright of partisan politics, and dare we say it, America eventually grasped hold of, and reinvigorated a nasty rhetoric of race and racism that poured quite viscously over the heads of Obama and his family, and really reintroduced this country to some of the worst racial sentiments and passions. We've had the rise of the Tea Party, the resistance of the Right-wing, the recrudescence of white supremacy, and white bigotry, and the revival of a nasty intemperate resistance to Black humanity. By calling Obama a simian, an ape; talking about his wife belonging not in a beauty magazine like Vogue, but rather in either Sports Illustrated as an athlete, but most especially in National Geographic as an animal. Those kinds of nastinesses dotted the landscape quite quickly after Obama assumed office.

Navigating race

02:07:38:19

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

I think Obama's racial reluctance was rather tragic. It would be like having Michael Jordan in office, but he can't talk basketball. "Hey President Jordan tell us about that pick and roll!" So look, on the one hand, who could blame Obama? "I don't want to be pigeonholed as the Black president. I don't want to be pigeonholed as 'the only thing I can talk about is race.' In fact, when I come into office, the greatest thing that is confronting the nation is the economy. Do I allow the banks to fail?" I've spoken to many people since. Look how he capitulated to the liberal junta that was in effect. The neo-liberal concern for political and economic institutions at the risk of and at the expense of ordinary people. He didn't bailout homeowners, he bailed out the banks. Stop. Can you imagine the headlines after the first Black president allows the banks to fail for the first time, right? And the worst crisis since the Great Depression? It ain't working. It ain't going to happen, and he couldn't allow it. So he understood that, "I've got to fix this economy, I've got to bailout the automobile industry, the TARP money has to be distributed," even though the more diverse states didn't receive as much money as some of the less diverse states, but the point is he bailed out the economy; he bailed out automobile industry, he put this nation on a good footing, he refused to allow these banks to fail, and we can have tremendous criticisms of the banks, but we have criticisms of the banks because they're there. Because he saved them. ...and so some of the enormous good that he did was unfortunately undercut by the obsession over his race. And yet equally dispiriting was his reluctance to even weigh in. Why was he reluctant? Well, he didn't want to be

pigeonholed. He knew that that's a rabbit hole that once you get down, it's hard to get up out of that hole, and that space, and that people would be obsessed, and then thirdly what he understood is that it would be divisive. Poll numbers went down. He wasn't as liked as he was when he didn't talk about race. So even from a practical viewpoint it was understandable why Obama didn't speak about race, but you're the president, and you got to be a leader, and you spoke about leadership, and you castigated George W. Bush. W for his failed leadership, for his lack of courage and vision, for his lack of smarts. And so if you're going to draw a sharp contrast between W and yourself, you got to step up to the plate, and unfortunately Obama just didn't do that.

02:10:32:04

His reluctance was also fueled by the fact that the perception that a Black man would be involved in racial discussion would taint the argument for many white people who, regardless of what he said, saw a Black face and therefore were opposed to him. And you know I'm an old Baptist preacher, and there's a story in the bible that says when you kick out the demons, if you don't put something in their place 7 worse demons will come along to occupy it. And the argument could be Obama's reluctance to speak about race left a great gulf. And others would speak about race; local communities would speak about it; the police people would speak about it to their ability. Black organizations and groups will speak about it, but especially those who were less skilled at the political level. So if you leave it open; if you don't weigh in, if you don't bring the bully pulpit of race to bear upon society, others who are less gifted or less good, who are less inclined to do the right thing, will fill

that vacuum. And I think when you look at the transition from Obama to Trump, Obama when the teacher of conscience is asking who will speak about race, Obama keeps his hand down. Trump puts his right up “oh I’ll talk all day long,” but he talks in ways that are divisive, that are cryptic, that are hurtful, that are painful, that are quite frankly racist, that are truncated by lack of nuance and sophistication. And the guy with all the skills, the guy with all the tools, is reluctant to speak up. And Obama’s reluctance may have been his personal disposition, too. Quiet, Hawaiian, let’s get along, I don’t want to ruffle the feathers, or rock the boat, but it was bad for the nation, because his reluctance kept him mute and quiet on the central issue of American culture. Despite everything he tried to do; fix the economy bailout the banks, bailout the automobile industry, make sure that gay and lesbians are protected in America, and all of the great stuff he did, the issue of race was persistent and dominant because it is America’s original sin. It is the major fault line around which and through which America defines itself, by which America understands itself, and if the most powerful figure in the nation, and indeed the world refuses to address it, it will not go well. It would not be a good thing. And the irony of course is that Obama said, “treat me like any other president. I don’t want to be better or worse, just treat me like any other”. Well President Obama, every other president before you has had to deal with the issue of race. Nobody got let off the hook. The white guys didn’t get a pass, right? They didn’t get a pass. You can’t get one either.

02:13:30:12

He saw that. I think he got bad advice. And look, Obama gathered around him the smartest people on everything, the economy, the smarter people on the

environment, smartest people about foreign policy. Who did he gather around him for the issue of race? We can't think. We can't remember. Of course, politically he had the wise counsel of Al Sharpton when it came to understanding African American communities and the like, but he gathered no racial thinkers who could challenge him; who could help him shape a polity that was rooted in an awareness of the necessity of dealing with race, even if you wanted to pitch it to a broader audience. So in that sense Obama was a victim of his own success. You wrote one of the greatest books ever, memoirs, *Dreams from My Father*. So you were qualified to speak about this issue. We see the nuance, the sophistication, the understanding, the racial tension, the dynamism. Even his first race speech, though not as great as the memoir, at least suggested that here's a guy who gets it. But what he gave into were false equivalencies. Black people from the 60's were upset. White people are upset now. Those are parallel. No, Black people are upset in the 60's because they're being denied opportunity, white people in the 2000's are upset to a large degree because they have to share their resources with Black people. His false equivalencies disallowed him to really be a benefit, an advantage, to the larger society. Obama was never pushed in the same way that Black Lives Matter pushed Bernie and Hillary.

02:15:11:19

So he never got his metal tested to that degree. He was able to escape pretty much unscathed, but I would argue that one of the reasons that Cory Booker and Kamala Harris find themselves struggling a bit with African American numbers at the polls is because there's a delayed response of disappointment over the Obama years. We're no longer going to wave a magical incantation

over us to get us to participate. Not that I'm saying Obama, and Cory Booker, and Kamala Harris don't have their differences. Obama is a political genius, one of the greatest we've seen in the nation in the last 50 years, and Harris and Cory Booker are tremendous politicians, so there are differences, but I think the delayed reaction of disappointment; of the bitter recognition, even though we hold Obama in high regard, we still are disappointed about what he wasn't able to do. And I think that shows up both in the lower poll number among African Americans for- for Harris and Booker, and also because in one sense Obama setup, not directly responsible for, but setup a kind of Trumpian dispensation where he would viscerally speak about race, directly speak about race, but in a fashion that is so divisive. Had Obama seized the reigns more definitively, even with the limitations he confronted, I think there might have been a different outcome. The fact is that Obama's reticence really restricted him in his own mind from playing a bigger role and a more vigorous role trying to bring comity and balance racially to this nation. So I think that when you look at him as a president overall, I think one of the top 10 presidents we've had. When you look at him as a president in regard to race, it's a very mixed bag.

02:17:17:19

You know, I think of Obama, and I love Shaquille O'Neal and I don't want him to be insulted here, but he's like the Shaquille O'Neal of presidents when it comes to race. Shaquille O'Neal was dominant. Kobe Bryant says had he been in a different kind of shape, he would have been the greatest player of all time. But he still was one of the most dominant players ever, and he could do everything except shoot foul shots. Right? He wasn't a great free throw

shooter. And they did Hack-the-Shaq, they beat him up at the end of the game. Why? Because you could put Shaq on the line, and he couldn't make the free throw. Obama is like Shaquille O'Neal when it comes to race. Great president bailing out banks, doing things, going... But when it came to race, he's messing up, he's not really shooting his free throws correctly. He's not concentrating on them. He didn't do a great deal of good. Even at the end when he was taking a well-deserved run around the track, a victory lap for his bailing out the automobile industry when he went to Detroit, 70 miles up the road was Flint, Michigan. A disproportionate number of those people in Flint who were impacted by the poisonous waters that were flowing through the pipes were African American. A perfect example, it wasn't explicitly Black, but it was primarily Black, and he might have addressed that: Quite reticent. When Dave Bing was the mayor in Detroit looking for resources, and Dave Bing had been at Syracuse and then went on to the Detroit Pistons and one of the 50 greatest players of all time in basketball, but then was a mayor after starting his steel business, was mayor of Detroit, didn't receive the kind of support that Obama gave to other mayors who were not African American. So there were ways in which his evolution was undeniable. He embraced his role more sensibly, although many others thought he could have been far more aggressive when it came to the issue of race because you don't have another race to run for, you can be yourself. But what many Black people missed, and I tried to tell them, he is being himself when you see him being moderate.

02:19:28:19

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

When you see him being very cautious, that is who he is. You projected your desire upon him, your design upon him, your druthers upon him. But at the end of the day, he was a middle of the road moderate Democrat who tried to make use of progressive politics in many instances to forge connections and change politics in America. But at the end, he was no racial radical, he was not even a figure who could understand the use of the bully pulpit to enhance African American and Latinx people, not in a partisan way, not in a narrow way, but in a way that would enhance his role as the President of the United States of America. If my hand is hurting, and it's fine, but the little finger is hurting, to help the little finger doesn't mean I don't like the entire hand. It means that I've got to help the little finger in order to make the hand more strong, right, to make it stronger. Obama didn't understand when it came to race that by helping Black people, you're helping America. And those who have helped us in the past understand that when Black people are strong, the nation is strong. Obama thought, if I help the nation get strong, Black people could come along. I think ultimately, he understood that he had to flip that script. As I said to him in the office, I said to him in the White House, "You know, if universalism worked, the Declaration of Independence can't be beat. The Constitution is great. The Bill of Rights are good. But they are not enough. We needed the Civil Rights Movement to make sure we could bridge the chasm between ideals and realities, between the Constitution and people in the street, so that you have to march those words from parchment to pavement. They were interred in ink, and you have to revive them and make them sing." So I said, "if the universal was good, if everything that's in place in America was great, you wouldn't need any special movements. We need a

movement to make sure that that occurs." I think he caught on a bit late in his own, you know, administration, in his own years, to the detriment of those citizens who looked up to him.

Charleston church shooting

02:21:48:18

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Well, when you think about the trajectory of Obama's time in office and dealing with race, you know, it's tagged by various crises that grasp hold of the nation's conscience and seizes its consciousness willy-nilly against anyone's will: Trayvon Martin, the Skip Gates fiasco before ...the Michael Brown killing by the cop in Ferguson, Missouri. And then of course the death of the nine souls, Black folk, at church in Bible study and prayer meeting one night in Charleston, South Carolina. The killing of those nine people by Dylan Roof, an avowed white supremacist who had been, you know, radicalized on the internet and then walks into that church, murders them. And before their bodies are cold, he is forgiven by the survivors of those families, in itself as a side episode to that entire encounter, a remarkable display of Black humanity and the willingness to forgive even the most heinous forms of white supremacy and violence in the name of the God that they serve. So Obama, seeing the nation torn by this, hurt by this, grieved by this is also edified by the forgiving response of the Black people who are the surviving family members. The nation is taken aback by the immediacy of the gesture of forgiveness. It sets into motion several things: Lindsey Graham and Nikki Haley will eventually and in an unanticipated development side with the

taking down of Confederate monuments, right, and not allowing them to any longer menace Black people and others who find those offensive, dotting the landscape of American civic culture, supported by their tax money, and yet defying their humanity and rejecting them outright as members equally of a society.

02:24:44:00

One cannot help but understand that those symbols and signs betokened in those statues said what they said. Heritage, to be certain, but a heritage of hate, of disavowing the humanity of Black people. So Obama saw the consequence of the forgiveness immediately in the aftermath, and decided to deliver that eulogy because he was not speaking merely to that congregation, he's speaking to the nation. And interestingly enough, Obama understood that he was the representative not only of the nation, and he was, but he also was representative of the desires and hopes of Black people to overcome their conditions. Right? So if Obama was the representative and the symbol of Black progress, Black people were the proxies for Obama. Ordinary Black people were his proxies. Can't kill him, kill us. Dylan Roof in his manifesto spoke about the consternation and bitterness and perhaps even the hatred of Obama, but he can't make it to the White House to murder him. So the Black people who are his proxy, innocent, random, anonymous Black people, are now the victims of white hatred because of his inability to engulf Obama and to dismiss and incinerate and therefore murder him. So Black people are the proxies to Obama, and Obama is the symbol of Black progress. Dylan Roof cannot murder Barack Obama, but he can reach anonymous Black people, random Black people. The rhyme and reason, of course, the most prominent

Black church in the area and so on, he had his own internal logic. But in the ultimate scheme of things, these are random human beings on a given night who are the victims of a plot of white supremacy from a young man who is a domestic terrorist radicalized online by fits and starts and episodic interventions of vastly ignorant and yet lethally inclined white supremacist groups. And they've taught him how to hate and reinforced his belief that it's this Black man, this president who has represented the onslaught against white people, that Black people go around killing white people.

02:27:29:19

All of the exaggerations, distortions, and lies that white supremacists are given to help create in this young man's mind a toxic brew. And so, South Carolina becomes his victim. Those nine souls become victims of his own domestic terrorism. And Obama sees that and seizes that as a moment. This is the kind of perfect storm, if you will: Black forgiveness, white outrage, the astonished breath-holding pearl-clutching moment and breast-beating occasion where all of these communities can come together and be outraged at the same time. Obama steps up to the plate, decides to give the eulogy for those people, because he is now not only the representative of Black people, not only the nation's father as any president is who happens to be male, but he's also the nation's pastor. And so he walks into that arena with the full weight and authority of the United States on his plate, and yet he is the nation's pastor. He is speaking out of the rhetoric of Blackness. If he has ever needed the rhetorical ploys of the Black church, he needs them now. If he's ever needed the moral and ethical imperatives that are generated out of a context of obedience to God, he needs them now. And if ever the civic religion

of democracy needs to be sustained by the particular beliefs of individual believers, it's now. And so all that comes together, and Obama stands there and delivers a remarkable eulogy rooted in America, rooted in the nation, rooted in the soul of the nation, rooted in the religious empathy that is generated when we understand the other, rooted in a consciousness of God as the ultimate judge of human community, and the rejection of bigotry and bias as the basis of our democracy. No clearer statement can be made. All of the reluctance has melted away. All of the hem hawing and the fits and starts, the gives and takes all dismissed.

02:30:00:16

And now a clear vision of redemption because the ultimate price has been paid by undesirable forces, right, that have killed nine souls, and they have become martyrs. And now the president must heal the wounds of the nation. This is a Lincolnian moment for Obama. You know, this is not the Gettysburg Address in brevity, but it is an address of one man to a nation, of one political figure to his constituents, of a president to his citizens, of a pastor to his congregation. And Obama struck every note correctly, every moment, every rhetorical gesture, every outreach, every acknowledgment of the good that can be done, calling upon those who had been victims and what they had said to this nation by giving us an example of their sacrifice. And on that night, Obama... on that day, Obama summoned the courage, the hope, the beauty of his own racial rhetoric, and all of the misgivings that he had once nurtured close to his breast had given away to his ability to beautifully express the empathy, the love, the support, and the incredible gratitude of this nation for these people's deaths. And when he sang at the end, Amazing Grace, it was a

tear jerk moment and a rallying cry by spontaneously giving voice to the song of an American slaver who had given up his past and sought the grace of God. And what better song to evoke at that moment than a nation in search of some kind of redemption past this moment? Would there be bitterness and recrimination? No, because the very people who died, their families didn't do so. That opens up a way for Obama to be able to resonate with that politics of forgiveness without being looked upon as somehow dismissing the agony, the hurt, the pain, the trauma that these people had endured. He struck the right note. He sung the right song. He gave the right sermon. He delivered the right eulogy. And he delivered the nation at a time of crisis into a politics of hope and ultimately into a politics of redemption.

Meeting with Obama in the White House

02:32:50:15

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

You know, the buildup to the encounter was quite intriguing, because I had served as a surrogate for President Obama when he first announced his run. The day he announced I was on a plane about to take off, and I called him on his cellphone. I said, you know, "Not Jack Kennedy but Black Kennedy." You know, I said, "You're Black Kennedy. You're looking presidential, you've got that Black overcoat." I said, "What a day," and remarked to him about my profound gratitude for his running and what it would mean to this nation. I said, "From now on I'll not be calling you Barack or Senator, I'm calling you President Obama." You know, they say in the Bible, "Speak of things as though they are." And so you know, I embraced him, I was a surrogate for

him, I fought some battles for him during the primaries and talking to various Black constituencies, especially those that had been quite obstreperous in their resistance to him. So I did work and fought battles, but I was very clear that once he would be successful and enter the White House that would shift my role in responsibility, because after he ran, whether or not he won, I would still be a scholar. I would still be an intellectual. I would still be a public intellectual trying to make valid arguments about, you know, tremendously complicated issues in ways that were lucid and clear to the public, one of which would be, if he were president, the good things he was doing but also the failures and flaws that would inevitably appear. And so, this is in the early flush of, you know, his success and he's in the White House, and I've got to kind of cajole them to get an interview because my book is going to be about Obama and race.

02:34:46:16

And they didn't want to talk about race. You know, when I talked to Valerie Jarrett, a tremendous aide of Obama but resisted the folks around him, necessarily didn't want to speak about race, he wanted to speak about anything but. I had to go through several channels, which was odd, in my mind, as a surrogate and as a friend and as a person who had known him since '92. That was odd to me. You know, I felt like the horse in Robert Frost's poem, "My little horse must think it queer to stop without a farmhouse near, between the woods and frozen lake the darkest evening of the year." I felt him on that. I was like, "I got you." But I persisted. And at first, I was offered, you know, five to seven minutes. I was like, you know, "Let's talk when you really come to your senses. That's ridiculous." I was eventually granted 15

minutes, but took about, you know 25 or so, maybe even half an hour of the president's time in the Oval Office. But that was revealing to me: A friend, an advocate, an ally, but the fact that they strictly wanted to control that message and not speak about race was revealing to me. A friend, an advocate, an ally, but the fact that they strictly wanted to control that message and not speak about race was revealing to me. And when I was in the Oval Office and pressing the president and asking him questions in the presence of Valerie Jarrett, it was revealing to me that this was going to be a long row to hoe, and it was going to be a tough way to go because, you know, he couldn't be as open and honest about issues of race as he could be before. I understood that to a degree, but at the same time the resistance they put forward to even speak about race indicated that it would be a quite rocky road for those who advocated for issues that needed to be heard.

02:36:50:19

But I was invited back for a meeting of leading Black figures, about 10 of us in a room and, you know, the well-known broadcaster and DJ, Tom Joyner, radio host, legendary figure, kind of had an interaction with me, "Well, Michael, you know, you're writing a book on Obama." This is nearly about 2012 and it's, you know, "You hold a great deal of influence. It's going to be a critical book at a point." You know, he's saying this, Obama is sitting not two, three feet from me across the table, and I'm saying, "This is an odd time for you to bring that up. Are you Nostradamus? Because I haven't even written a book. Do you know what it's going to be?" I'm thinking. But I interact with Obama, and I say, "Yes, I appreciate the president, I love the president, I support the president, but we disagree in terms of our approaches to race. He

thinks a rising tide will lift all boats. I happen to think that's not the case." And I said in Obama's presence there, I said, "When you go to the doctor or to the emergency ward, you don't get medicine. It depends on what your malady is. If you have a hangnail, you get aspirin. If you have diabetes, you get insulin. And if you've got cancer, you get chemotherapy." I said, "Public policies, like the medicines that I make an analogy to, are best, are most successful when they are tailored to the ill they attempt to relieve."

02:38:23:21

And that was my argument then and remains so now. The president initially resisted that, and then later in his term he listened to folk like myself or William Julius Wilson, who said you've got to talk about poverty specifically. Because William Julius Wilson changed his mind, he used to think it was neutral: Be race neutral, address all people, and let Black people fit in because they will inevitably be helped by policies that help the greater number of people. But Wilson said, "No, you've got to address this specifically," which is what I was arguing even before he had said so publicly and Obama had embraced that. So there was consternation, there was back and forth, there was resentment.

Michael Brown

02:39:10:15

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

Then later on, you know, when I criticized Obama on television gently in the aftermath of Mike Brown and Ferguson, you know, the general criticism was, you can speak about race, you can use the bully pulpit in ways no others can.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

Let's have you weigh in, in a redemptive fashion. You know, immediately after the Mike Brown situation, the president said, "Some Black people do commit crimes. If so, they should go to jail." That was insensitive to me, it was tone deaf. Let's wait until you know, here's a young man killed by a police person, this is a repeating pattern that seems to be destructive to Black America, so I thought he needed a bit more tone sensitivity to what was going on. So my interactions with Obama directly about these issues grew, and as there was a greater chasm between us because of, I think, his failure to address these issues in ways that could be instructive given his own, not only knowledge, but the responsibility of the White House to address these issues. Black people used to defend him all the time, "Oh my God, what do you want from him? He can't be a Black Panther, he can't stand up every day and talk about race and kumbaya and (Swahili) and so on. We don't want him to speak Swahili. We don't want the commercial, we just want the product. You didn't have to give us the commercial, you don't have to stand up and announce it." Be sophisticated, be subtle, but policies need to be crafted and constructed that would address Black unemployment, which was sky high for a time under Obama.

02:40:45:23

Had that been a white president, Black leaders would have been marching, as Emmanuel Cleaver said, around the White House to protest him. But he caught a break because he was Black, so he had it both ways. On the one hand, he caught a break from Black people because they felt he's the president, we don't want to jump on him the way we would a white president. But on the other hand, he didn't do much specifically tailored to

Black people to address their ills. My Brother's Keeper was a tremendous program, but it's a social service program he could have done after he got out of office. How could he use the presidency, executive orders, or the bully pulpit to argue on behalf of policies that would have a direct and immediate impact upon Black America, was the issue? The way he did for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender folk; the way he did for the environment; but the way he did not do and was reluctant to behave, in regard to race.

Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr.

02:41:45:12

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

To a degree Obama was right. After the Skip Gates fiasco, where Professor Henry Louis Gates in Cambridge returning home from China on a trip, had to jimmy his door because the door was jammed. His Black driver got out to help him force his way in. An innocent passerby saw it, called the police, they arrived, discovered that okay no big deal here. It's actually the guy who owns the home, but the conversation is tart, and untempered on both sides, perhaps. This world famous Black intellectual up against the power of the state through Sergeant Crowley, the local police person there. And so Gates versus Crowley becomes Black versus white. Gates is arrested. Obama's asked to weigh in on it, and he said, "The police acted stupidly. When you get to a house, that's good, when you try to figure out what's going on, that's good, but when you found out it's the guy's house, leave. You arrest him, you're acting stupidly." Now Obama wasn't lying, but he couldn't tell the truth. What he discovered is you can be the most powerful Black man in the

world; you can be the most -- literally -- powerful man in the world because whoever occupies that seat as president is the most powerful person in the world.

02:43:09:02

Similar to whoever was the-- whoever was the champion of the-- well, whoever was the heavyweight champion was seen as the baddest man on the globe. Whether that was Sonny Liston, or Muhammad Ali, or George Foreman, or Lennox Lewis, or Mike Tyson, you the baddest man on the planet, because you're the heavyweight champion of the world. Whoever's the president is the most powerful person in the world. So Obama could be the most powerful person in the world on the one hand, and limited and lethally restricted on the other. Certain things he couldn't say, certain things he couldn't be, certain places he couldn't go rhetorically, and race was one of them. But having said that, after the Gates fiasco, he learned a bad lesson. Don't talk about race. Let's not weigh in. And so he was reluctant. That reluctance was reinforced by certain political problems in the culture. His advisors telling him, "Ah you really didn't want to do that," but it left a gulf, and a lacuna. And nature abhors a vacuum, and he left a racial vacuum. You see an evolution in Obama from, you know, being chastised vehemently by the law enforcement community when he said that the police acted stupidly. Many people in his administration did not want him to apologize, no beer summit. Many young Black people, staffers, "You didn't do anything wrong. You spoke the truth." But speaking the truth is one thing, offending whites upon whom you depend for polls and reelection is another. So that beer summit was a concession to, you know, his belief that he spoke out of turn.

That spelled bad news for those who were advocates for an explicit engagement with the issue of race, not a divisive one, but anybody who engages race is seen as divisive by those who are resisting of it. But there was an evolution. He learned to be quiet, he learned to be silent, or he learned to take Black people to task. One of the things Obama learned is that he couldn't speak explicitly about race after the Skip Gates situation, but he also learned he could get kudos and points for castigating Black people in public.

Obama's respectability politics and the Black community

02:45:29:14

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

When he was running for the presidency, he had visited a Chicago church where he remonstrated morally against Black fathers. It doesn't take, you know, anything to be a Black father in terms of producing a child. Any old fool, he said, could produce a child, but you've got to take care of that child. That's what a father is. He would never use that language in a white church. I remember calling the headquarters and saying, "Come on now. He can't get away with that kind of stuff. You can't do this politics of respectability." And that was one of the few times, even as a surrogate, I spoke in direct contradiction to an Obama policy or recommendation. I wrote a piece for Time magazine where I talked about, you know, studies done by Boston College Professor Rebekah Coley, who said that non-resident Black fathers spend more time with their children than non-residential fathers of any other ethnic group. So first of all, not only are you playing to stereotype, you're literally wrong scientifically and empirically. There's no empirical

verification for the assertion that Black men don't spend time with their kids who are not in their lives physically, directly, and immediately at home. So, he was wrong there, but it played to the galleries. He wasn't speaking to Black people; he was speaking to white America through Black people. He did that several times.

02:47:06:01

I was there in the audience at the Congressional Black Caucus when he said, "Stop complaining. Take off your bedroom slippers and put on your marching boots." You're saying that to people like John Lewis and Maxine Waters and John Conyers and, you know, Charlie Rangel who... You know, when you were knee high to a tadpole, they were fighting on the front lines. John Lewis was getting his skull cracked. So, Obama was condescending at points. He also understood that if he could morally hold in check Black people in public, white folk would look at it and say, "Hey, he's willing to hold his own accountable. So he's a good guy." You know, when he went to Morehouse College and he delivered a rather blistering commencement address to young Black men, you would have thought he was speaking to a group of men who were in detention center, who were graduating. You know, "Nobody's going to give you anything that you haven't earned." Sir, they're graduating from college. The only person who didn't earn a degree that day was Barack Obama, who got an honorary degree. Right? Now contrast what Obama did at Morehouse, if you think I'm being perhaps a bit unfair, to what Robert F. Smith did recently when he was the last commencement speaker at Morehouse in 2019, where he offered \$40 million to retire the debt in advance of those who were graduating. Now, Obama doesn't have \$40

million, but I would rather somebody come to deliver hopefulness to those young people and edify them and challenge them to live up to their good future, versus a man who challenges them by castigating them morally before the world. And until Robert F. Smith, we didn't have a parallel of an equally powerful figure, in terms of finance, who could come to contra distinct Obama's example there.

Obama's growth toward the end of his term

02:49:14:13

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

So Obama did grow, however, Obama did learn. And near the end of his term not only with you know, what happened with the incident in South Carolina, but in taking on criminal justice reform and trying to figure out things in the disproportionate measures that were applied to Black people. His own attorney general, Eric Holder, had years before been trying to push reducing the disparity between crack cocaine and powder cocaine in terms of the kinds of sentences that were being handed out. That was a legacy of the crime bill of the '90s, of course, with Bill Clinton, pushed not only by Joe Biden and Bill Clinton, but many other African Americans who were sensitive to the fact that their communities were being overtaken by drug gangs and the like, and they wanted to figure out a way to reduce that crime. So Obama certainly got hold of that at the end of his presidency, began to push more straightforwardly for that issue because it was disproportionately affecting African American people. And even though My Brother's Keeper, again, is best suited for social service orientations, at least he used the bully pulpit to

try to address that. And then thirdly, in dealing with the bettering the relationships between law enforcement and Black communities, trying to have a commission negotiate some tremendous advances in order to address those situations. So there's no question that Obama tried at the end, and many people give him credit for that, but the long enduring impact of his refusals and his being reticent suggests that his legacy, when it comes to race, is mixed. You know, he didn't use his bully pulpit as vigorously as Bill Clinton, who wanted to have a conversation on race. And I'm quite conscious of the fact that white presidents had white privilege in a way that Obama didn't. They could speak about race in a way Obama couldn't. Bill Clinton could go on Arsenio Hall and play the saxophone in a way Obama never could, if he played the saxophone, because that would be stereotypical: Oh, we expect a Black man to be able to wear dark sunglasses and play the saxophone. That was a feather in Clinton's cap. So we understand that that was the case. But even, you know, adjusting for that, the fact is that Obama's reticence really restricted him in his own mind from playing a bigger role and a more vigorous role in trying to bring comity and balance racially to this nation. So I think that when you look at him as a president overall, I think one of the top ten presidents we've had.

Donald Trump's election

02:52:08:10

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON:

When you think about the fact that the 2016 elections resulted in the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, there were two men who were deeply

surprised. Donald Trump was surprised, himself. You can see the look when he's being told that he actually won the presidency. I think he's like astonished. And I think Barack Obama is deeply and profoundly disturbed and surprised at the same time. He says all the right things, the people have spoken, this is the will of the people, and the like. But you know inside he's got to be going, "My God." He fought so- so valiantly for his own legacy to be preserved and remembered. And remember, Donald Trump didn't begin the birther movement, but he extended it, he gave it legs. He exacerbated the narrow and hateful positions on Obama that the birthers had adopted. And so quite vigorously and quite explicitly, Donald Trump had introduced racist rhetoric into the presidency by attacking Barack Obama as he did. Questioning his talent, questioning his skill, questioning his grades in school, which is kind of ironic because no man is more, you know, impacted by un-enlightenment. Right? In fact, you know, Donald Trump has been unmolested by enlightenment. Here's a guy who is addicted to ignorance almost preternaturally. His own instincts, his own native [haught] seems to be vast reaches of ignorance, and probably so but unconsciously so, which is why he names himself a genius. But Obama has been victim of the birther-ism that Donald Trump perpetuated and now sits there.

02:54:02:20

Can you imagine? The very man who not only attacked me personally but was attacking Black people more broadly and is attacking the ideals and norms of comity and civility that should prevail in America. I must now hand the keys to and pass the baton to. And you wonder if he said to himself, "Maybe if, maybe if I had been a bit more explicit. Because obviously the way

I did it didn't work in terms of, you know, getting Hillary Clinton elected." Now we know that she won by almost three million votes and it was the swing states and the like, but the result is still the same: Donald Trump is president, Hillary Clinton wasn't. Why was it that close to begin with, given Obama's legacy? Even notwithstanding the irrational hatred of Hillary Clinton, as Obama said, "The most prepared and qualified person ever to run for the presidency." Then what do we figure? We figure that as the Bible says, if you've got a demon in the house and you get it out, if you don't keep it out and replace it, seven more worse will come in. And I'm thinking, Obama may be sitting there going, "Maybe if I had spoken more, you know, straightforwardly, addressed race." Because we don't blame Obama for the rise of Trump, but he bears responsibility in the sense that race will be spoken about in America. You have a choice as a president: Either I'm going to guide that racial discourse, I'm going to guide that ship as much as I can. Presidents can barely affect, you know, the impact, can barely affect the direction of the ship of state. Right? They can mostly hold on and keep it on an even keel. But it's surprisingly depressing what little impact presidents have on some aspects of the American political order. But as Donald Trump has shown, they have an enormous impact on the spirit, the interpretation, and the feeling of democracy in this nation.

02:56:12:05

And they can do real substantive damage if they misapply the law or attempt out of selfish gain to rapaciously engage in practices that stuff their pockets but leave the nation bare. So in the use of executive orders, you know, Trump says, "Hey, I got it from Obama." You know, and Obama at the end did do a

few more executive orders than perhaps in comparison to some of his predecessors, although I think it equals out at the end, but not so much for African American interests or racial interests. You know, Donald Trump has not been shy about saying, "I'm going to use every ounce of influence I have to change the world." And whatever you say, however you stand, whatever you believe about Trump, and I am not a fan, what cannot be denied is that he understands this is a moment in time that can be used and leveraged in such a consequential and influential manner. Now most of the consequences have been horrible and tragic, and most of the leveraging has been done in self aggrandizing fashion with the kind of unstinted narcissism of a bully. Right? Donald Trump stands every morning, using social media. What is he doing? He's tweeting, but tweets as excretion. He's excreting the feces of his moral depravity into a nation he has turned into his psychic commode, and he's dumping on us daily. And it's not just, you know, Black people and brown people, though they are his special, you know, bailiwick. He's doing it to everybody. Donald Trump is treating America the way racist white people treated Black folk. And America doesn't like it. "Oh my God! He's calling us names. If we don't agree with him, he just craps on us. He refuses to be rational." Welcome to our world. "No matter what we do, we can't appease him." Oh, you don't think that's how racism works? Donald Trump is the fleshly thesaurus of white supremacy.

02:58:31:16

Donald Trump is the living, breathing example of what Black and brown people and other conscientious white people have warned this nation against for 400 years. This is what white supremacy looks like. Now the rest of the

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

nation is getting a taste of what Black and brown people and other minorities have tasted in this country from the very beginning. I hope that Barack Obama feels that, not intentionally but inadvertently, he helped set up and create the conditions of flourishing of a malignant tumor in the body politic, while he as our responsible oncologist allowed those tumors to grow. I don't blame him for white supremacy. I don't blame him for white racism. I don't blame him for the resurgence and recrudescence of bigotry. But I do hold him accountable for allowing a racial vacuum to exist that was filled by a man whose banality and ignorance have irreparably harmed this nation. And that Barack Obama might have had a more positive and uplifting impact were he willing to get his hands a bit dirtier and willing to endure whatever calumny or assault he might have to endure for the nation's benefit. Now on one hand, he's endured so much: The nastiness, the hate, the horrible threats to his life, the horrible racism that his family's endured. But as President of the United States of America, when it came to the issue of race in many ways, that remarkable human being, that thin man whose thin shoulders bore the weight of democracy so brilliantly and beautifully, failed us on the issue of race.

END TC: 03:00:24:13