

RACE

IN THE

OBAMA YEARS

A Digital Reader

Reflections, Conversations, and Arguments

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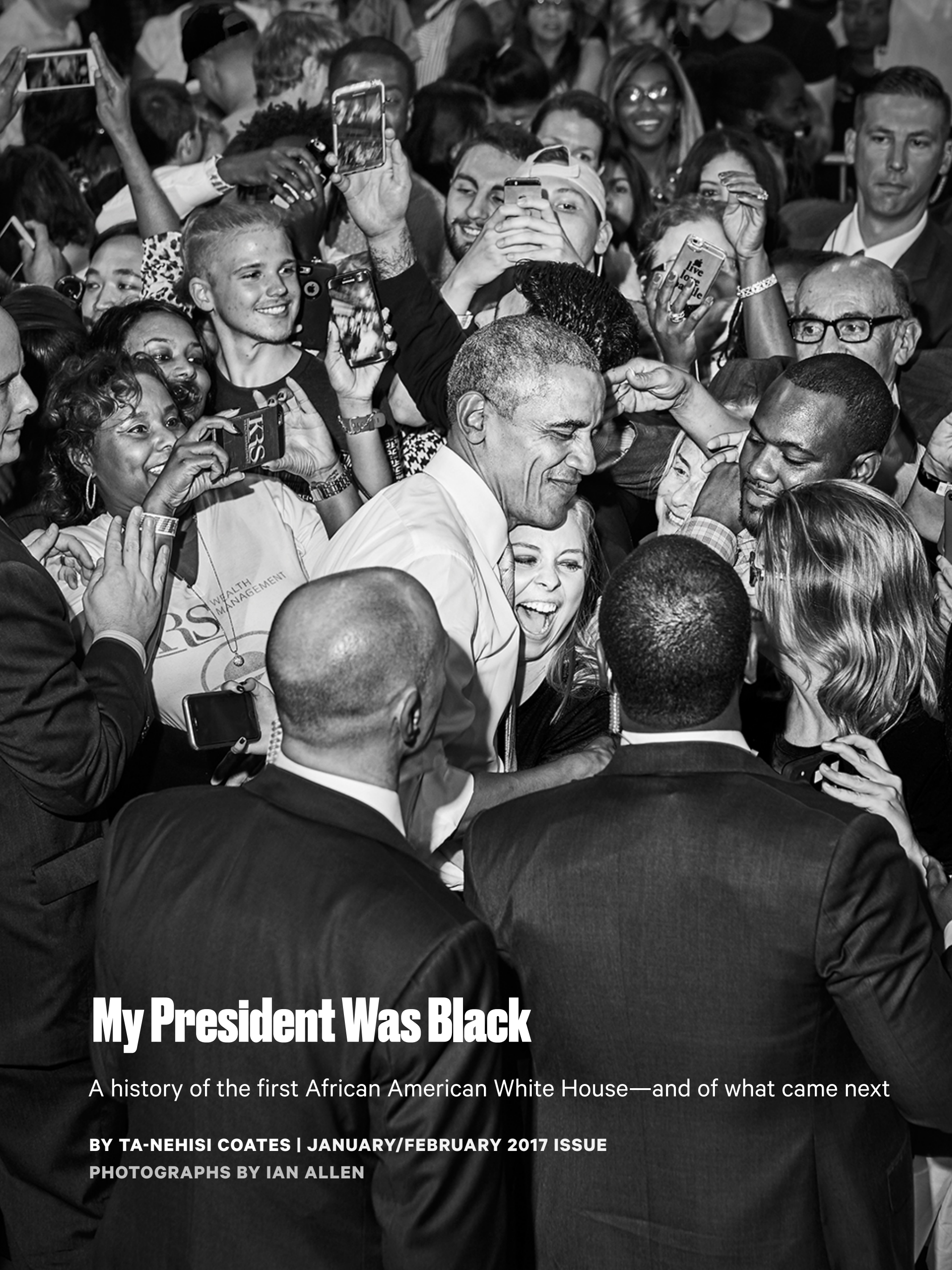
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Introduction

In 2016, *The Atlantic*'s Ta-Nehisi Coates spent many hours over several months speaking one-on-one with Barack Obama about what it meant to govern as the first African American president of the United States. The result—Coates's cover story for *The Atlantic*'s January/February 2017 issue, "My President Was Black"—prompted an intense national and global conversation about race and politics in America.

This collection includes Coates's story along with his behind-the-scenes interviews and a number of response essays. Together, they represent an early draft of a complex history that will be explored and debated for decades to come.



My President Was Black

A history of the first African American White House—and of what came next

BY TA-NEHISI COATES | JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017 ISSUE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN ALLEN

*“They’re a rotten crowd,”
I shouted across the lawn.
“You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.”*

— *F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby*

I. “LOVE WILL MAKE YOU DO WRONG”

In the waning days of President Barack Obama’s administration, he and his wife, Michelle, hosted a farewell party, the full import of which no one could then grasp. It was late October, Friday the 21st, and the president had spent many of the previous weeks, as he would spend the two subsequent weeks, campaigning for the Democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton. Things were looking up. Polls in the crucial states of Virginia and Pennsylvania showed Clinton with solid advantages. The formidable GOP strongholds of Georgia and Texas were said to be under threat. The moment seemed to buoy Obama. He had been light on his feet in these last few weeks, cracking jokes at the expense of Republican opponents and laughing off hecklers. At a rally in Orlando on October 28, he greeted a student who would be introducing him by dancing toward her and then noting that the song playing over the loudspeakers—the Gap Band’s “Outstanding”—was older than she was. “This is classic!” he said. Then he flashed the smile that had launched America’s first black presidency, and started dancing again. Three months still remained before Inauguration Day, but staffers had already begun to count down the days. They did this with a mix of pride and longing—like college seniors in early May. They had no sense of the world they were graduating into. None of us did.

The farewell party, presented by BET (Black Entertainment Television), was the last in a series of concerts the first couple had hosted at the White House. Guests were asked to arrive at 5:30 p.m. By 6, two long lines stretched behind the Treasury Building, where the Secret Service was checking names. The people in these lines were, in the main, black, and their humor reflected it. The brisker queue was dubbed the “good-hair line” by one guest, and there was laughter at the prospect of the Secret Service subjecting us all to a “brown-paper-bag test.” This did not come to pass, but security was tight. Several guests were told to stand in a makeshift pen and wait to have their backgrounds checked a second time.

Dave Chappelle was there. He coolly explained the peril and promise of comedy in what was then still only a remotely potential Donald Trump presidency: “I mean, we never had a guy have his own pussygate scandal.” Everyone laughed. A few weeks later, he would be roundly criticized for telling a crowd at the Cutting Room, in New York, that he had voted for Clinton but did not feel good about it. “She’s going to be on a coin someday,” Chappelle said. “And her behavior has not been coinworthy.” But on this crisp October night, everything felt inevitable and grand. There was a slight wind. It had been in the 80s for much of that week. Now, as the sun set, the season remembered its name. Women shivered in their cocktail dresses. Gentlemen chivalrously handed over their suit coats. But when Naomi Campbell strolled past the security pen in a sleeveless number, she seemed as invulnerable as ever.

Cellphones were confiscated to prevent surreptitious recordings from leaking out. (This effort was unsuccessful. The next day, a partygoer would tweet a video of the leader of the free world dancing to Drake’s “Hotline Bling.”) After withstanding the barrage of security, guests were welcomed into the East Wing of the White House, and then ushered back out into the night, where they boarded a succession of orange-and-green trolleys. The singer and actress Janelle Monáe, her famous and fantastic pompadour preceding her, stepped on board and joked with a companion about the historical import of “sitting in the back of the bus.” She took a seat three rows from the front and hummed into the night. The trolley dropped the guests on the South Lawn, in front of a giant tent. The South Lawn’s fountain was lit up with blue lights. The White House proper loomed like a ghost in the distance. I heard the band, inside, beginning to play Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together.”

“Well, you can tell what type of night this is,” Obama said from the stage, opening the event. “Not the usual ruffles and flourishes!”

The crowd roared.

“This must be a BET event!”

The crowd roared louder still.

Obama placed the concert in the White House’s musical tradition, noting that guests of the Kennedys had once done the twist at the residence—“the twerking of their time,” he said, before adding, “There will be no twerking tonight. At least not by me.”

The Obamas are fervent and eclectic music fans. In the past eight years, they have hosted performances at the White House by everyone from Mavis Staples to Bob Dylan to Tony Bennett to the Blind Boys of Alabama. After the rapper Common was invited to perform in 2011, a small fracas ensued in the right-wing media. He performed anyway—and was invited back again this glorious fall evening and almost stole the show. The crowd sang along to the hook for his hit ballad “The Light.” And when he brought on the gospel singer Yolanda Adams to fill in for John Legend on the Oscar-winning song “Glory,” glee turned to rapture.

De La Soul was there. The hip-hop trio had come of age as boyish B-boys with Gumby-style high-top fades. Now they moved across the stage with a lovely mix of lethargy and grace, like your favorite uncle making his way down the *Soul Train* line, wary of throwing out a hip. I felt a sense of victory watching them rock the crowd, all while keeping it in the pocket. The victory belonged to hip-hop—an art form birthed in the burning Bronx and now standing full grown, at the White House, unbroken and unedited. Usher led the crowd in a call-and-response: “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.” Jill Scott showed off her operatic chops. Bell Biv DeVoe, contemporaries of De La, made history with their performance by surely becoming the first group to suggest to a presidential audience that one should “never trust a big butt and a smile.”

The ties between the Obama White House and the hip-hop community are genuine. The Obamas are social with Beyoncé and Jay-Z. They hosted Chance the Rapper and Frank Ocean at a state dinner, and last year invited Swizz Beatz, Busta Rhymes, and Ludacris, among others, to discuss criminal-justice reform and other initiatives. Obama once stood in the Rose Garden passing large flash cards to the *Hamilton* creator and rapper Lin-Manuel Miranda, who then freestyled using each word on the cards. “Drop the beat,” Obama said, inaugurating the session. At 55, Obama is younger than pioneering hip-hop artists like Afrika Bambaataa, DJ Kool Herc, and Kurtis Blow. If Obama’s enormous symbolic power draws primarily from being the country’s first black president, it also draws from his membership in hip-hop’s foundational generation.

That night, the men were sharp in their gray or black suits and optional ties. Those who were not in suits had chosen to make a statement, like the dark-skinned young man who strolled in, sockless, with blue jeans cuffed so as to accentuate his gorgeous black-suede loafers. Everything in his ensemble seemed to say, “My fellow Americans, do not try this at home.” There were women in fur jackets and high heels; others with sculpted naturals, the sides shaved close, the tops blooming into curls; others still in gold bamboo earrings and long blond dreads. When the actor Jesse Williams

took the stage, seemingly awed before such black excellence, before such black opulence, assembled just feet from where slaves had once toiled, he simply said, “Look where we are. Look where we are right now.”

OBAMA’S VICTORIES IN 2008 AND 2012 WERE DISMISSED BY SOME OF HIS CRITICS AS MERELY SYMBOLIC FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS. BUT THERE IS NOTHING “MERE” ABOUT SYMBOLS.

This would not happen again, and everyone knew it. It was not just that there might never be another African American president of the United States. It was the feeling that this particular black family, the Obamas, represented the best of black people, the ultimate credit to the race, incomparable in elegance and bearing. “There are no more,” the comedian Sinbad joked back in 2010. “There are no black men raised in Kansas and Hawaii. That’s the last one. Y’all better treat this one right. The next one gonna be from Cleveland. He gonna wear a perm. Then you gonna see what it’s really like.” Throughout their residency, the Obamas had refrained from showing America “what it’s really like,” and had instead followed the first lady’s motto, “When they go low, we go high.” This was the ideal—black and graceful under fire—saluted that evening. The president was lionized as “our crown jewel.” The first lady was praised as the woman “who put the *O* in *Obama*.”

Barack Obama’s victories in 2008 and 2012 were dismissed by some of his critics as merely symbolic for African Americans. But there is nothing “mere” about symbols. The power embedded in the word *nigger* is also symbolic. Burning crosses do not literally raise the black poverty rate, and the Confederate flag does not directly expand the wealth gap.

Much as the unbroken ranks of 43 white male presidents communicated that the highest office of government in the country—indeed, the most powerful political

offices in the world—was off-limits to black individuals, the election of Barack Obama communicated that the prohibition had been lifted. It communicated much more. Before Obama triumphed in 2008, the most-famous depictions of black success tended to be entertainers or athletes. But Obama had shown that it was “possible to be smart and cool at the same damn time,” as Jesse Williams put it at the BET party. Moreover, he had not embarrassed his people with a string of scandals. Against the specter of black pathology, against the narrow images of welfare moms and deadbeat dads, his time in the White House had been an eight-year showcase of a healthy and successful black family spanning three generations, with two dogs to boot. In short, he became a symbol of black people’s everyday, extraordinary Americanness.

Whiteness in America is a different symbol—a badge of advantage. In a country of professed meritocratic competition, this badge has long ensured an unerring privilege, represented in a 220-year monopoly on the highest office in the land. For some not-insubstantial sector of the country, the elevation of Barack Obama communicated that the power of the badge had diminished. For eight long years, the badge-holders watched him. They saw footage of the president throwing bounce passes and shooting jumpers. They saw him enter a locker room, give a businesslike handshake to a white staffer, and then greet Kevin Durant with something more soulful. They saw his wife dancing with Jimmy Fallon and posing, resplendent, on the covers of magazines that had, only a decade earlier, been almost exclusively, if unofficially, reserved for ladies imbued with the great power of the badge.

For the preservation of the badge, insidious rumors were concocted to denigrate the first black White House. Obama gave free cellphones to disheveled welfare recipients. Obama went to Europe and complained that “ordinary men and women are too small-minded to govern their own affairs.” Obama had inscribed an Arabic saying on his wedding ring, then stopped wearing the ring, in observance of Ramadan. He canceled the National Day of Prayer; refused to sign certificates for Eagle Scouts; faked his attendance at Columbia University; and used a teleprompter to address a group of elementary-school students. The badge-holders fumed. They wanted their country back. And, though no one at the farewell party knew it, in a couple of weeks they would have it.

On this October night, though, the stage belonged to another America. At the end of the party, Obama looked out into the crowd, searching for Dave Chappelle. “Where’s Dave?” he cried. And then, finding him, the president referenced Chappelle’s legendary Brooklyn concert. “You got your block party. I got my block party.” Then the band

struck up Al Green's "Love and Happiness"—the evening's theme. The president danced in a line next to Ronnie DeVoe. Together they mouthed the lyrics: "Make you do right. Love will make you do wrong."

II. HE WALKED ON ICE BUT NEVER FELL

Last spring, I went to the White House to meet the president for lunch. I arrived slightly early and sat in the waiting area. I was introduced to a deaf woman who worked as the president's receptionist, a black woman who worked in the press office, a Muslim woman in a head scarf who worked on the National Security Council, and an Iranian American woman who worked as a personal aide to the president. This receiving party represented a healthy cross section of the people Donald Trump had been mocking, and would continue to spend his campaign mocking. At the time, the president seemed untroubled by Trump. When I told Obama that I thought Trump's candidacy was an explicit reaction to the fact of a black president, he said he could see that, but then enumerated other explanations. When assessing Trump's chances, he was direct: He couldn't win.

This assessment was born out of the president's innate optimism and unwavering faith in the ultimate wisdom of the American people—the same traits that had propelled his unlikely five-year ascent from assemblyman in the Illinois state legislature to U.S. senator to leader of the free world. The speech that launched his rise, the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, emerged right from this logic. He addressed himself to his "fellow Americans, Democrats, Republicans, independents," all of whom, he insisted, were more united than they had been led to believe. America was home to devout worshippers and Little League coaches in blue states, civil libertarians and "gay friends" in red states. The presumably white "counties around Chicago" did not want their taxes burned on welfare, but they didn't want them wasted on a bloated Pentagon budget either. Inner-city black families, no matter their perils, understood "that government alone can't teach our kids to learn ... that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white."

Perceived differences were the work of "spinmasters and negative-ad peddlers who embrace the politics of 'anything goes.'" Real America had no use for such categorizations. By Obama's lights, there was no liberal America, no conservative America,

no black America, no white America, no Latino America, no Asian America, only “the United States of America.” All these disparate strands of the American experience were bound together by a common hope:

It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a mill worker’s son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.

This speech ran counter to the history of the people it sought to address. Some of those same immigrants had firebombed the homes of the children of those same slaves. That young naval lieutenant was an imperial agent for a failed, immoral war. American division was real. In 2004, John Kerry did not win a single southern state. But Obama appealed to a belief in innocence—in particular a white innocence—that ascribed the country’s historical errors more to misunderstanding and the work of a small cabal than to any deliberate malevolence or widespread racism. America was good. America was great.

Over the next 12 years, I came to regard Obama as a skilled politician, a deeply moral human being, and one of the greatest presidents in American history. He was phenomenal—the most agile interpreter and navigator of the color line I had ever seen. He had an ability to emote a deep and sincere connection to the hearts of black people, while never doubting the hearts of white people. This was the core of his 2004 keynote, and it marked his historic race speech during the 2008 campaign at Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center—and blinded him to the appeal of Trump. (“As a general proposition, it’s hard to run for president by telling people how terrible things are,” Obama once said to me.)

But if the president’s inability to cement his legacy in the form of Hillary Clinton proved the limits of his optimism, it also revealed the exceptional nature of his presidential victories. For eight years Barack Obama walked on ice and never fell. Nothing in that time suggested that straight talk on the facts of racism in American life would have given him surer footing.

I HAD MET THE PRESIDENT a few times before. In his second term, I’d written articles criticizing him for his overriding trust in color-blind policy and his embrace of “personal responsibility” rhetoric when speaking to African Americans. I saw him as playing both sides. He would invoke his identity as a president of all people to

decline to advocate for black policy—and then invoke his black identity to lecture black people for continuing to “make bad choices.” In response, Obama had invited me, along with other journalists, to the White House for off-the-record conversations. I attempted to press my points in these sessions. My efforts were laughable and ineffective. I was always inappropriately dressed, and inappropriately calibrated in tone: In one instance, I was too deferential; in another, too bellicose. I was discom-bobulated by fear—not by fear of the power of his office (though that is a fearsome and impressive thing) but by fear of his obvious brilliance. It is said that Obama speaks “professorially,” a fact that understates the quickness and agility of his mind. These were not like press conferences—the president would speak in depth and with great familiarity about a range of subjects. Once, I watched him effortlessly reply to queries covering everything from electoral politics to the American economy to environmental policy. And then he turned to me. I thought of George Foreman, who once booked an exhibition with multiple opponents in which he pounded five straight journeymen—and I suddenly had some idea of how it felt to be the last of them.

OBAMA'S 2004 KEYNOTE ADDRESS CONFLATED THE SLAVE AND THE NATION OF IMMIGRANTS WHO PROFITED FROM HIM.

Last spring, we had a light lunch. We talked casually and candidly. He talked about the brilliance of LeBron James and Stephen Curry—not as basketball talents but as grounded individuals. I asked him whether he was angry at his father, who had abandoned him at a young age to move back to Kenya, and whether that motivated any of his rhetoric. He said it did not, and he credited the attitude of his mother and grandparents for this. Then it was my turn to be autobiographical. I told him that I had heard the kind of “straighten up” talk he had been giving to black youth, for instance in his 2013 Morehouse commencement address, all my life. I told him that I thought it was not sensitive to the inner turmoil that can be obscured by the hardness kids often evince. I told him I thought this because I had once been one of those kids. He seemed to concede this point, but I couldn't tell whether it mattered to him. Nonetheless, he agreed to a series of more formal conversations on this and other topics.

The improbability of a black president had once been so strong that its most vivid representations were comedic. Witness Dave Chappelle's profane Black Bush from the early 2000s ("This nigger very possibly has weapons of mass destruction! I can't sleep on that!") or Richard Pryor's black president in the 1970s promising black astronauts and black quarterbacks ("Ever since the Rams got rid of James Harris, my jaw's been uptight!"). In this model, so potent is the force of blackness that the presidency is forced to conform to it. But once the notion advanced out of comedy and into reality, the opposite proved to be true.

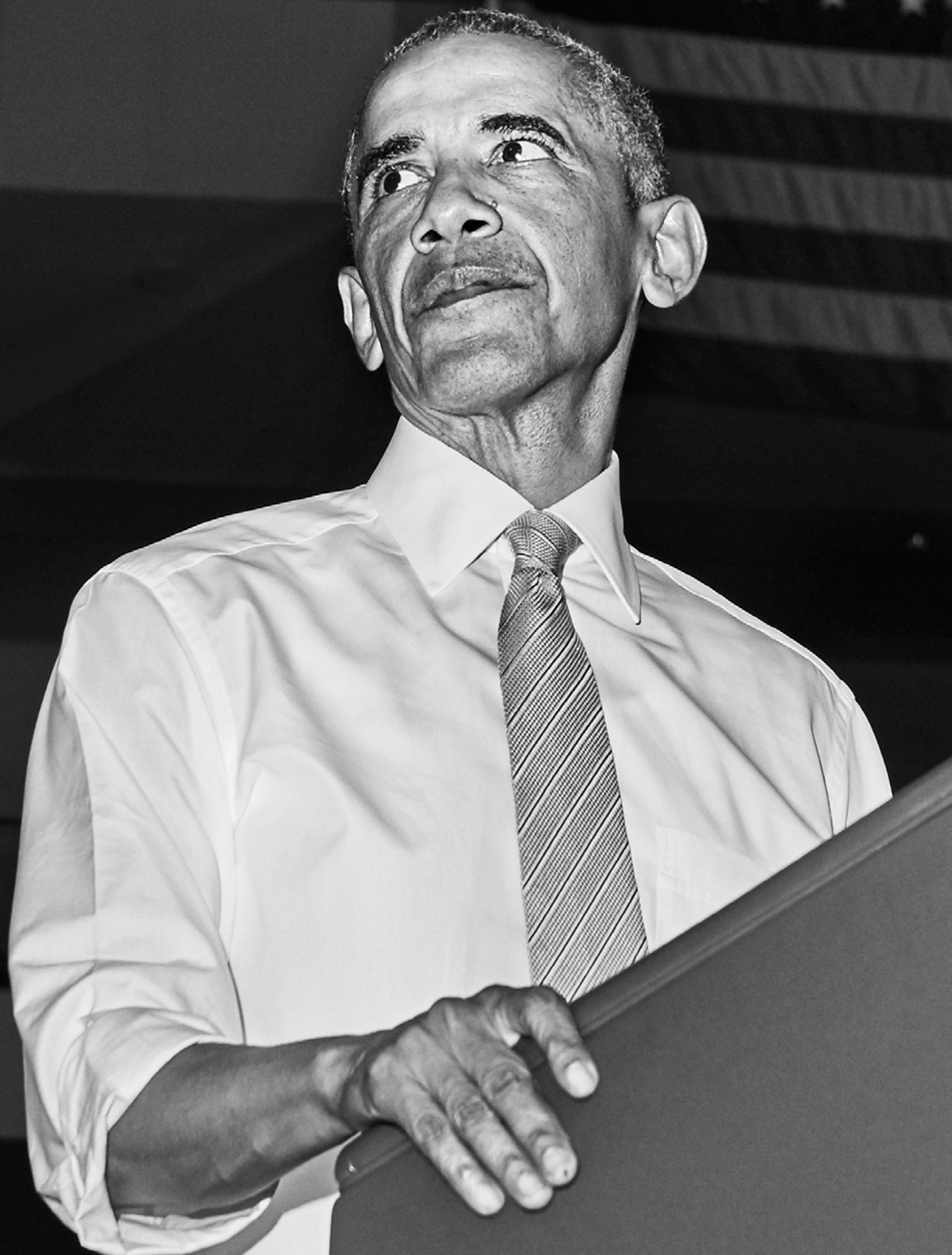
Obama's DNC speech is the key. It does not belong to the literature of "the struggle"; it belongs to the literature of prospective presidents—men (as it turns out) who speak not to gravity and reality, but to aspirations and dreams. When Lincoln invoked the dream of a nation "conceived in liberty" and pledged to the ideal that "all men are created equal," he erased the near-extinction of one people and the enslavement of another. When Roosevelt told the country that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he invoked the dream of American omnipotence and boundless capability. But black people, then living under a campaign of terror for more than half a century, had quite a bit to fear, and Roosevelt could not save them. The dream Ronald Reagan invoked in 1984—that "it's morning again in America"—meant nothing to the inner cities, besieged as they were by decades of redlining policies, not to mention crack and Saturday-night specials. Likewise, Obama's keynote address conflated the slave and the nation of immigrants who profited from him. To reinforce the majoritarian dream, the nightmare endured by the minority is erased. That is the tradition to which the "skinny kid with a funny name" who would be president belonged. It is also the only tradition in existence that could have possibly put a black person in the White House.

Obama's embrace of white innocence was demonstrably necessary as a matter of political survival. Whenever he attempted to buck this directive, he was disciplined. His mild objection to the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 2009 contributed to his declining favorability numbers among whites—still a majority of voters. His comments after the killing of Trayvon Martin—"If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon"—helped make that tragedy a rallying point for people who did not care about Martin's killer as much as they cared about finding ways to oppose the president. Michael Tesler, a political-science professor at UC Irvine, has studied the effect of Obama's race on the American electorate. "No other factor, in fact, came close to dividing the Democratic primary electorate as powerfully as their feelings about African Americans," he and his co-author, David O. Sears, concluded in their book, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. "The impact of racial atti-

tudes on individual vote decisions ... was so strong that it appears to have even outstripped the substantive impact of racial attitudes on Jesse Jackson's more racially charged campaign for the nomination in 1988." When Tesler looked at the 2012 campaign in his second book, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*, very little had improved. Analyzing the extent to which racial attitudes affected people associated with Obama during the 2012 election, Tesler concluded that "racial attitudes spilled over from Barack Obama into mass assessments of Mitt Romney, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Charlie Crist, and even the Obama family's dog Bo."

Yet despite this entrenched racial resentment, and in the face of complete resistance by congressional Republicans, overtly launched from the moment Obama arrived in the White House, the president accomplished major feats. He remade the nation's health-care system. He revitalized a Justice Department that vigorously investigated police brutality and discrimination, and he began dismantling the private-prison system for federal inmates. Obama nominated the first Latina justice to the Supreme Court, gave presidential support to marriage equality, and ended the U.S. military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, thus honoring the civil-rights tradition that had inspired him. And if his very existence inflamed America's racist conscience, it also expanded the country's anti-racist imagination. Millions of young people now know their only president to have been an African American. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Jelani Cobb once noted that "until there was a black Presidency it was impossible to conceive of the limitations of one." This is just as true of the possibilities. In 2014, the Obama administration committed itself to reversing the War on Drugs through the power of presidential commutation. The administration said that it could commute the sentences of as many as 10,000 prisoners. As of November, the president had commuted only 944 sentences. By any measure, Obama's effort fell woefully short, except for this small one: the measure of almost every other modern president who preceded him. Obama's 944 commutations are the most in nearly a century—and more than the past 11 presidents' combined.

Obama was born into a country where laws barring his very conception—let alone his ascendancy to the presidency—had long stood in force. A black president would always be a contradiction for a government that, throughout most of its history, had oppressed black people. The attempt to resolve this contradiction through Obama—a black man with deep roots in the white world—was remarkable. The price it exacted, incredible. The world it gave way to, unthinkable.



III.

“I DECIDED TO BECOME PART OF THAT WORLD”

When Barack Obama was 10, his father gave him a basketball, a gift that connected the two directly. Obama was born in 1961 in Hawaii and raised by his mother, Ann Dunham, who was white, and her parents, Stanley and Madelyn. They loved him ferociously, supported him emotionally, and encouraged him intellectually. They also told him he was black. Ann gave him books to read about famous black people. When Obama’s mother had begun dating his father, the news had not been greeted with the threat of lynching (as it might have been in various parts of the continental United States), and Obama’s grandparents always spoke positively of his father. This biography makes Obama nearly unique among black people of his era.

In the president’s memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, he says he was not an especially talented basketball player, but he played with a consuming passion. That passion was directed at something more than just the mastering of the pick-and-roll or the perfecting of his jump shot. Obama came of age during the time of the University of Hawaii basketball team’s “Fabulous Five”—a name given to its all-black starting five, two decades before it would be resurrected at the University of Michigan by the likes of Chris Webber and Jalen Rose. In his memoir, Obama writes that he would watch the University of Hawaii players laughing at “some inside joke,” winking “at the girls on the sidelines,” or “casually flipping lay-ups.” What Obama saw in the Fabulous Five was not just game, but a culture he found attractive:

By the time I reached high school, I was playing on Punahou’s teams, and could take my game to the university courts, where a handful of black men, mostly gym rats and has-beens, would teach me an attitude that didn’t just have to do with the sport. That respect came from what you did and not who your daddy was. That you could talk stuff to rattle an opponent, but that you should shut the hell up if you couldn’t back it up. That you didn’t let anyone sneak up behind you to see emotions—like hurt or fear—you didn’t want them to see.

These are lessons, particularly the last one, that for black people apply as much on the street as they do on the court. Basketball was a link for Obama, a medium for downloading black culture from the mainland that birthed the Fabulous Five. Assessing his own thought process at the time, Obama writes, “I decided to become part of that world.” This is one of the most incredible sentences ever written in the long, decorated history of black memoir, if only because very few black people have ever enjoyed enough power to write it.

Historically, in black autobiography, to be remanded into the black race has meant exposure to a myriad of traumas, often commencing in childhood. Frederick Douglass is separated from his grandmother. The enslaved Harriet Ann Jacobs must constantly cope with the threat of rape before she escapes. After telling his teacher he wants to be a lawyer, Malcolm X is told that the job isn't for "niggers." Black culture often serves as the balm for such traumas, or even the means to resist them. Douglass finds the courage to face the "slave-breaker" Edward Covey after being given an allegedly enchanted root by "a genuine African" possessing powers from "the eastern nations." Malcolm X's dancing connects him to his "long-suppressed African instincts." If black racial identity speaks to all the things done to people of recent African ancestry, black cultural identity was created in response to them. The division is not neat; the two are linked, and it is incredibly hard to be a full participant in the world of cultural identity without experiencing the trauma of racial identity.

Obama is somewhat different. He writes of bloodying the nose of a white kid who called him a "coon," and of chafing at racist remarks from a tennis coach, and of feeling offended after a white woman in his apartment building told the manager that he was following her. But the kinds of traumas that marked African Americans of his generation—beatings at the hands of racist police, being herded into poor schools, grinding out a life in a tenement building—were mostly abstract for him. Moreover, the kind of spatial restriction that most black people feel at an early age—having rocks thrown at you for being on the wrong side of the tracks, for instance—was largely absent from his life. In its place, Obama was gifted with a well-stamped passport and admittance to elite private schools—all of which spoke of other identities, other lives and other worlds where the color line was neither determinative nor especially relevant. Obama could have grown into a raceless cosmopolitan. Surely he would have lived in a world of problems, but problems not embodied by him.

Instead, he decided to enter this world.

"I always felt as if being black was cool," Obama told me while traveling to a campaign event. He was sitting on *Air Force One*, his tie loosened, his shirtsleeves rolled up. "[Being black] was not something to run away from but something to embrace. Why that is, I think, is complicated. Part of it is I think that my mother thought black folks were cool, and if your mother loves you and is praising you—and says you look good, are smart—as you are, then you don't kind of think in terms of *How can I avoid this?* You feel pretty good about it."

As a child, Obama's embrace of blackness was facilitated, not impeded, by white people. Obama's mother pointed him toward the history and culture of African Americans. Stanley, his grandfather, who came originally from Kansas, took him to basketball games at the University of Hawaii, as well as to black bars. Stanley introduced him to the black writer Frank Marshall Davis. The facilitation was as much indirect as direct. Obama recalls watching his grandfather at those black bars and understanding that "most of the people in the bar weren't there out of choice," and that "our presence there felt forced." From his mother's life of extensive travel, he learned to value the significance of having a home.

THE FIRST WHITE PEOPLE OBAMA EVER KNEW WERE DECENT IN A WAY THAT FEW BLACK PEOPLE OF THAT ERA EXPERIENCED.

That suspicion of rootlessness extends throughout *Dreams From My Father*. He describes integration as a "one-way street" on which black people are asked to abandon themselves to fully experience America's benefits. Confronted with a woman named Joyce, a mixed-race, green-eyed college classmate who insists that she is not "black" but "multiracial," Obama is scornful. "That was the problem with people like Joyce," he writes. "They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people." Later in the memoir, Obama tells the story of falling in love with a white woman. During a visit to her family's country house, he found himself in the library, which was filled with pictures of the woman's illustrious relations. But instead of being in awe, Obama realized that he and the woman lived in different worlds. "And I knew that if we stayed together, I'd eventually live in hers," he writes. "Between the two of us, I was the one who knew how to live as an outsider."

After college, Obama found a home, as well as a sense of himself, working on the South Side of Chicago as a community organizer. "When I started doing that work, my story merges with a larger story. That happens naturally for a John Lewis," he told me, referring to the civil-rights hero and Democratic congressman. "That happens more naturally for you. It was less obvious to me. *How do I pull all these different strains together:*

Kenya and Hawaii and Kansas, and white and black and Asian—how does that fit? And through action, through work, I suddenly see myself as part of the bigger process for, yes, delivering justice for the [African American community] and specifically the South Side community, the low-income people—justice on behalf of the African American community. But also thereby promoting my ideas of justice and equality and empathy that my mother taught me were universal. So I’m in a position to understand those essential parts of me not as separate and apart from any particular community but connected to every community. And I can fit the African American struggle for freedom and justice in the context of the universal aspiration for freedom and justice.”

Throughout Obama’s 2008 campaign and into his presidency, this attitude proved key to his deep support in the black community. African Americans, weary of high achievers who distanced themselves from their black roots, understood that Obama had paid a price for checking “black” on his census form, and for living black, for hosting Common, for brushing dirt off his shoulder during the primaries, for marrying a woman who looked like Michelle Obama. If women, as a gender, must suffer the constant evaluations and denigrations of men, black women must suffer that, plus a broad dismissal from the realm of what American society deems to be beautiful. But Michelle Obama is beautiful in the way that black people know themselves to be. Her prominence as first lady directly attacks a poison that diminishes black girls from the moment they are capable of opening a magazine or turning on a television.

The South Side of Chicago, where Obama began his political career, is home to arguably the most prominent and storied black political establishment in the country. In addition to Oscar Stanton De Priest, the first African American elected to Congress in the 20th century, the South Side produced the city’s first black mayor, Harold Washington; Jesse Jackson, who twice ran for president; and Carol Moseley Braun, the first African American woman to win a Senate race. These victories helped give rise to Obama’s own. Harold Washington served as an inspiration to Obama and looms heavily over the Chicago section of *Dreams From My Father*.

Washington forged the kind of broad coalition that Obama would later assemble nationally. But Washington did this in the mid-1980s in segregated Chicago, and he had not had the luxury, as Obama did, of becoming black with minimal trauma. “There was an edge to Harold that frightened some white voters,” David Axelrod, who worked for both Washington and Obama, told me recently. Axelrod recalled sitting around a conference table with Washington after he had won the Democratic

primary for his reelection in 1987, just as the mayor was about to hold a press conference. Washington asked what percentage of Chicago's white vote he'd received. "And someone said, 'Well, you got 21 percent. And that's really good because last time'"—in his successful 1983 mayoral campaign—"you only got 8," Axelrod recalled. "And he kind of smiled, sadly, and said, 'You know, I probably spent 70 percent of my time in those white neighborhoods, and I think I've been a good mayor for everybody, and I got 21 percent of the white vote and we think it's good.' And he just kind of shook his head and said, 'Ain't it a bitch to be a black man in the land of the free and the home of the brave?'"

"That was Harold. He felt those things. He had fought in an all-black unit in World War II. He had come up in times—and that and the sort of indignities of what you had to do to come up through the machine really seared him." During his 1983 mayoral campaign, Washington was loudly booed outside a church in northwest Chicago by middle-class Poles, Italians, and Irish, who feared blacks would uproot them. "It was as vicious and ugly as anything you would have seen in the old South," Axelrod said.

Obama's ties to the South Side tradition that Washington represented were complicated. Like Washington, Obama attempted to forge a coalition between black South Siders and the broader community. But Obama, despite his adherence to black cultural mores, was, with his Kansan and Hawaiian roots, his Ivy League pedigree, and his ties to the University of Chicago, still an exotic out-of-towner. "They were a bit skeptical of him," says Salim Muwakkil, a journalist who has covered Obama since before his days in the Illinois state Senate. "Chicago is a very insular community, and he came from nowhere, seemingly."

Obama compounded people's suspicions by refusing to humble himself and go along with the political currents of the South Side. "A lot of the politicians, especially the black ones, were just leery of him," Kaye Wilson, the godmother to Obama's children and one of the president's earliest political supporters, told me recently.

But even as many in the black political community were skeptical of Obama, others encouraged him—sometimes when they voted against him. When Obama lost the 2000 Democratic-primary race against Bobby Rush, the African American incumbent congressman representing Illinois' First Congressional District, the then-still-obscure future president experienced the defeat as having to do more with his age than his exoticism. "I'd go meet people and I'd knock on doors and stuff, and some of the grandmothers who were the folks I'd been organizing and working with doing

community stuff, they weren't parroting back some notion of 'You're too Harvard,' or 'You're too Hyde Park,' or what have you," Obama told me. "They'd say, 'You're a wonderful young man, you're going to do great things. You just have to be patient.' So I didn't feel the loss as a rejection by black people. I felt the loss as 'politics anywhere is tough.' Politics in Chicago is especially tough. And being able to break through in the African American community is difficult because of the enormous loyalty that people feel towards anybody who has been around awhile."

There was no one around to compete for loyalty when Obama ran for Senate in 2004, or for president in 2008. He was no longer competing against other African Americans; he was representing them. "He had that hybridity which told the 'do-gooders'—in Chicago they call the reformers the do-gooders—that he was acceptable," Muwakkil told me.

Obama ran for the Senate two decades after the death of Harold Washington. Axelrod checked in on the precinct where Washington had been so loudly booed by white Chicagoans. "Obama carried, against seven candidates for the Senate, almost the entire northwest side and that precinct," he said. "And I told him, 'Harold's smiling down on us tonight.'"

WHAT OBAMA WAS ABLE TO OFFER WHITE AMERICA IS SOMETHING VERY FEW AFRICAN AMERICANS COULD—TRUST.

Obama believes that his statewide victory for the Illinois Senate seat held particular portent for the events of 2008. "Illinois is the most demographically representative state in the country," he told me. "If you took all the percentages of black, white, Latino; rural, urban; agricultural, manufacturing—[if] you took that cross section across the country and you shrank it, it would be Illinois."

Illinois effectively allowed Obama to play a scrimmage before the big national game in 2008. "When I ran for the Senate I had to go into southern Illinois, downstate Illinois, farming communities—some with very tough racial histories, some areas where

there just were no African Americans of any number,” Obama told me. “And when we won that race, not just an African American from Chicago, but an African American with an exotic history and [the] name Barack Hussein Obama, [it showed that I] could connect with and appeal to a much broader audience.”

The mix of Obama’s “hybridity” and the changing times allowed him to extend his appeal beyond the white ethnic corners of Chicago, past the downstate portions of Illinois, and out into the country at large. “Ben Nelson, one of the most conservative Democrats in the Senate, from Nebraska, would only bring in one national Democrat to campaign for him,” Obama recalls. “And it was me. And so part of the reason I was willing to run [for president in 2008] was that I had had two years in which we were generating enormous crowds all across the country—and the majority of those crowds were not African American; and they were in pretty remote places, or unlikely places. They weren’t just big cities or they weren’t just liberal enclaves. So what that told me was, it was possible.”

What those crowds saw was a black candidate unlike any other before him. To simply point to Obama’s white mother, or to his African father, or even to his rearing in Hawaii, is to miss the point. For most African Americans, white people exist either as a direct or an indirect force for bad in their lives. Biraciality is no shield against this; often it just intensifies the problem. What proved key for Barack Obama was not that he was born to a black man and a white woman, but that his white family approved of the union, and approved of the child who came from it. They did this in 1961—a time when sex between black men and white women, in large swaths of the country, was not just illegal but fraught with mortal danger. But that danger is not part of Obama’s story. The first white people he ever knew, the ones who raised him, were decent in a way that very few black people of that era experienced.

I asked Obama what he made of his grandparents’ impressively civilized reception of his father. “It wasn’t Harry Belafonte,” Obama said laughingly of his father. “This was like an *African* African. And he was like a blue-black brother. Nilotic. And so, yeah, I will always give my grandparents credit for that. I’m not saying they were happy about it. I’m not saying that they were not, after the guy leaves, looking at each other like, ‘What the heck?’ But whatever misgivings they had, they never expressed to me, never spilled over into how they interacted with me.

“Now, part of it, as I say in my book, was we were in this unique environment in Hawaii where I think it was much easier. I don’t know if it would have been as easy for

them if they were living in Chicago at the time, because the lines just weren't as sharply drawn in Hawaii as they were on the mainland."

Obama's early positive interactions with his white family members gave him a fundamentally different outlook toward the wider world than most blacks of the 1960s had. Obama told me he rarely had "the working assumption of discrimination, the working assumption that white people would not treat me right or give me an opportunity or judge me [other than] on the basis of merit." He continued, "The kind of working assumption" that white people would discriminate against him or treat him poorly "is less embedded in my psyche than it is, say, with Michelle."

In this, the first lady is more representative of black America than her husband is. African Americans typically raise their children to protect themselves against a presumed hostility from white teachers, white police officers, white supervisors, and white co-workers. The need for that defense is, more often than not, reinforced either directly by actual encounters or indirectly by observing the vast differences between one's own experience and those across the color line. Marty Nesbitt, the president's longtime best friend, who, like Obama, had positive interactions with whites at a relatively early age, told me that when he and his wife went to buy their first car, she was insistent on buying from a black salesperson. "I'm like, 'We've got to find a salesman,'" Nesbitt said. "She's like, 'No, no, no. We're waiting for the brother.' And I'm like, 'He's with a customer.' They were filling out documents and she was like, 'We're going to stay around.' And a white guy came up to us. 'Can I help you?' 'Nope.'" Nesbitt was not out to condemn anyone with this story. He was asserting that "the willingness of African Americans [in Chicago] to help lift each other up is powerful."

But that willingness to help is also a defense, produced by decades of discrimination. Obama sees race through a different lens, Kaye Wilson told me. "It's just very different from ours," she explained. "He's got buddies that are white, and they're his buddies, and they love him. And I don't think they love him just because he's the president. They love him because they're his friends from Hawaii, some from college and all."

"So I think he's got that, whereas I think growing up in the racist United States, we enter this thing with, you know, 'I'm looking at you. I'm not trusting you to be one hundred with me.' And I think he grew up in a way that he had to trust [white people]—how can you live under the roof with people and think that they don't love you? He needs that frame of reference. He needs that lens. If he didn't have it, it would be ... a Jesse Jackson, you know? Or Al Sharpton. Different lens."

That lens, born of literally relating to whites, allowed Obama to imagine that he could be the country's first black president. "If I walked into a room and it's a bunch of white farmers, trade unionists, middle age—I'm not walking in thinking, *Man, I've got to show them that I'm normal*," Obama explained. "I walk in there, I think, with a set of assumptions: like, these people look just like my grandparents. And I see the same Jell-O mold that my grandmother served, and they've got the same, you know, little stuff on their mantelpieces. And so I am maybe disarming them by just assuming that we're okay."

What Obama was able to offer white America is something very few African Americans could—trust. The vast majority of us are, necessarily, too crippled by our defenses to ever consider such a proposition. But Obama, through a mixture of ancestral connections and distance from the poisons of Jim Crow, can credibly and sincerely trust the majority population of this country. That trust is reinforced, not contradicted, by his blackness. Obama isn't shuffling before white power (Herman Cain's "shucky ducky" act) or flattering white ego (O. J. Simpson's listing not being seen as black as a great accomplishment). That, too, is defensive, and deep down, I suspect, white people know it. He stands firm in his own cultural traditions and says to the country something virtually no black person can, but every president must: "I believe you."

IV. "YOU STILL GOTTA GO BACK TO THE HOOD"

Just after Columbus Day, I accompanied the president and his formidable entourage on a visit to North Carolina A&T State University, in Greensboro. Four days earlier, *The Washington Post* had published an old audio clip that featured Donald Trump lamenting a failed sexual conquest and exhorting the virtues of sexual assault. The next day, Trump claimed that this was "locker room" talk. As we flew to North Carolina, the president was in a state of bemused disbelief. He plopped down in a chair in the staff cabin of *Air Force One* and said, "I've been in a lot of locker rooms. I don't think I've ever heard that one before." He was casual and relaxed. A feeling of cautious inevitability emanated from his staff, and why not? Every day seemed to bring a new, more shocking revelation or piece of evidence showing Trump to be unfit for the presidency: He had lost nearly \$1 billion in a single year. He had likely not paid taxes in 18 years. He was running a "university," for which he was under formal legal investigation. He had trampled on his own campaign's messaging by engaging in a Twitter crusade against a former beauty-pageant contestant. He had been denounced by leader-

ship in his own party, and the trickle of prominent Republicans—both in and out of office—who had publicly repudiated him threatened to become a geyser. At this moment, the idea that a campaign so saturated in open bigotry, misogyny, chaos, and possible corruption could win a national election was ludicrous. This was America.

The president was going to North Carolina to keynote a campaign rally for Clinton, but first he was scheduled for a conversation about My Brother's Keeper, his initiative on behalf of disadvantaged youth. Announcing My Brother's Keeper—or MBK, as it's come to be called—in 2014, the president had sought to avoid giving the program a partisan valence, noting that it was “not some big new government program.” Instead, it would involve the government in concert with the nonprofit and business sectors to intervene in the lives of young men of color who were “at risk.” MBK serves as a kind of network for those elements of federal, state, and local government that might already have a presence in the lives of these young men. It is a quintessentially Obama program—conservative in scope, with impacts that are measurable.

**HE PLOPPED DOWN IN A CHAIR AND SAID,
“I’VE BEEN IN A LOT OF LOCKER ROOMS. I DON’T
THINK I’VE EVER HEARD THAT ONE BEFORE.”**

“It comes right out of his own life,” Broderick Johnson, the Cabinet secretary and an assistant to the president, who heads MBK, told me recently. “I have heard him say, ‘I don’t want us to have a bunch of forums on race.’ He reminds people, ‘Yeah, we can talk about this. But what are we going to *do*?’” On this afternoon in North Carolina, what Obama did was sit with a group of young men who’d turned their lives around in part because of MBK. They told stories of being in the street, of choosing quick money over school, of their homes being shot up, and—through the help of mentoring or job programs brokered by MBK—transitioning into college or a job. Obama listened solemnly and empathetically to each of them. “It doesn’t take that much,” he told them. “It just takes someone laying hands on you and saying, ‘Hey, man, you count.’”

When he asked the young men whether they had a message he should take back to policy makers in Washington, D.C., one observed that despite their best individual

efforts, they still had to go back to the very same deprived neighborhoods that had been the sources of trouble for them. “It’s your environment,” the young man said. “You can do what you want, but you still gotta go back to the hood.”

He was correct. The ghettos of America are the direct result of decades of public-policy decisions: the redlining of real-estate zoning maps, the expanded authority given to prosecutors, the increased funding given to prisons. And all of this was done on the backs of people still reeling from the 250-year legacy of slavery. The results of this negative investment are clear—African Americans rank at the bottom of nearly every major socioeconomic measure in the country.

Obama’s formula for closing this chasm between black and white America, like that of many progressive politicians today, proceeded from policy designed for all of America. Blacks disproportionately benefit from this effort, since they are disproportionately in need. The Affordable Care Act, which cut the uninsured rate in the black community by at least a third, was Obama’s most prominent example. Its full benefit has yet to be felt by African Americans, because several states in the South have declined to expand Medicaid. But when the president and I were meeting, the ACA’s advocates believed that pressure on state budgets would force expansion, and there was evidence to support this: Louisiana had expanded Medicaid earlier in 2016, and advocates were gearing up for wars to be waged in Georgia and Virginia.

Obama also emphasized the need for a strong Justice Department with a deep commitment to nondiscrimination. When Obama moved into the White House in 2009, the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division “was in shambles,” former Attorney General Eric Holder told me recently. “I mean, I had been there for 12 years as a line guy. I started out in ’76, so I served under Republicans and Democrats. And what the [George W.] Bush administration, what the Bush DOJ did, was unlike anything that had ever happened before in terms of politicized hiring.” The career civil servants below the political appointees, Holder said, were not even invited to the meetings in which the key hiring and policy decisions were made. After Obama’s inauguration, Holder told me, “I remember going to tell all the folks at the Civil Rights Division, ‘The Civil Rights Division is open for business again.’ The president gave me additional funds to hire people.”

The political press developed a narrative that because Obama felt he had to modulate his rhetoric on race, Holder was the administration’s true, and thus blacker, conscience. Holder is certainly blunter, and this worried some of the White House staff.

Early in Obama's first term, Holder gave a speech on race in which he said the United States had been a "nation of cowards" on the subject. But positioning the two men as opposites elides an important fact: Holder was appointed by the president, and went only as far as the president allowed. I asked Holder whether he had toned down his rhetoric after that controversial speech. "Nope," he said. Reflecting on his relationship with the president, Holder said, "We were also kind of different people, you know? He is the Zen guy. And I'm kind of the hot-blooded West Indian. And I thought we made a good team, but there's nothing that I ever did or said that I don't think he would have said, 'I support him 100 percent.'

"Now, the 'nation of cowards' speech, the president might have used a different phrase—maybe, probably. But he and I share a worldview, you know? And when I hear people say, 'Well, you are blacker than him' or something like that, I think, *What are you all talking about?*"

For much of his presidency, a standard portion of Obama's speeches about race riffed on black people's need to turn off the television, stop eating junk food, and stop blaming white people for their problems. Obama would deliver this lecture to any black audience, regardless of context. It was bizarre, for instance, to see the president warning young men who'd just graduated from Morehouse College, one of the most storied black colleges in the country, about making "excuses" and blaming whites.

This part of the Obama formula is the most troubling, and least thought-out. This judgment emerges from my own biography. I am the product of black parents who encouraged me to read, of black teachers who felt my work ethic did not match my potential, of black college professors who taught me intellectual rigor. And they did this in a world that every day insulted their humanity. It was not so much that the black layabouts and deadbeats Obama invoked in his speeches were unrecognizable. I had seen those people too. But I'd also seen the same among white people. If black men were overrepresented among drug dealers and absentee dads of the world, it was directly related to their being underrepresented among the Bernie Madoffs and Kenneth Lays of the world. Power was what mattered, and what characterized the differences between black and white America was not a difference in work ethic, but a system engineered to place one on top of the other.

The mark of that system is visible at every level of American society, regardless of the quality of one's choices. For instance, the unemployment rate among black college graduates (4.1 percent) is almost the same as the unemployment rate among white

high-school graduates (4.6 percent). But that college degree is generally purchased at a higher price by blacks than by whites. According to research by the Brookings Institution, African Americans tend to carry more student debt four years after graduation (\$53,000 versus \$28,000) and suffer from a higher default rate on their loans (7.6 percent versus 2.4 percent) than white Americans. This is both the result and the perpetuator of a sprawling wealth gap between the races. White households, on average, hold seven times as much wealth as black households—a difference so large as to make comparing the “black middle class” and “white middle class” meaningless; they’re simply not comparable. According to Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University who studies economic mobility, black families making \$100,000 a year or more live in more-disadvantaged neighborhoods than white families making less than \$30,000. This gap didn’t just appear by magic; it’s the result of the government’s effort over many decades to create a pigmentocracy—one that will continue without explicit intervention.

Obama had been on the record as opposing reparations. But now, late in his presidency, he seemed more open to the idea—in theory, at least, if not in practice.

“Theoretically, you can make obviously a powerful argument that centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, discrimination are the primary cause for all those gaps,” Obama said, referencing the gulf in education, wealth, and employment that separates black and white America. “That those were wrongs to the black community as a whole, and black families specifically, and that in order to close that gap, a society has a moral obligation to make a large, aggressive investment, even if it’s not in the form of individual reparations checks but in the form of a Marshall Plan.”

The political problems with turning the argument for reparations into reality are manifold, Obama said. “If you look at countries like South Africa, where you had a black majority, there have been efforts to tax and help that black majority, but it hasn’t come in the form of a formal reparations program. You have countries like India that have tried to help untouchables, with essentially affirmative-action programs, but it hasn’t fundamentally changed the structure of their societies. So the bottom line is that it’s hard to find a model in which you can practically administer and sustain political support for those kinds of efforts.”

Obama went on to say that it would be better, and more realistic, to get the country to rally behind a robust liberal agenda and build on the enormous progress that’s been made toward getting white Americans to accept nondiscrimination as a basic operat-

ing premise. But the progress toward nondiscrimination did not appear overnight. It was achieved by people willing to make an unpopular argument and live on the frontier of public opinion. I asked him whether it wasn't—despite the practical obstacles—worth arguing that the state has a collective responsibility not only for its achievements but for its sins.

“I want my children—I want Malia and Sasha—to understand that they've got responsibilities beyond just what they themselves have done,” Obama said. “That they have a responsibility to the larger community and the larger nation, that they should be sensitive to and extra thoughtful about the plight of people who have been oppressed in the past, are oppressed currently. So that's a wisdom that I want to transmit to my kids ... But I would say that's a high level of enlightenment that you're looking to have from a majority of the society. And it may be something that future generations are more open to, but I am pretty confident that for the foreseeable future, using the argument of nondiscrimination, and ‘Let's get it right for the kids who are here right now,’ and giving them the best chance possible, is going to be a more persuasive argument.”

Obama is unfailingly optimistic about the empathy and capabilities of the American people. His job necessitates this: “At some level what the people want to feel is that the person leading them sees the best in them,” he told me. But I found it interesting that that optimism does not extend to the possibility of the public's accepting wisdoms—such as the moral logic of reparations—that the president, by his own account, has accepted for himself and is willing to teach his children. Obama says he always tells his staff that “better is good.” The notion that a president would attempt to achieve change within the boundaries of the accepted consensus is appropriate. But Obama is almost constitutionally skeptical of those who seek to achieve change outside that consensus.

EARLY IN 2016, Obama invited a group of African American leaders to meet with him at the White House. When some of the activists affiliated with Black Lives Matter refused to attend, Obama began calling them out in speeches. “You can't refuse to meet because that might compromise the purity of your position,” he said. “The value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, get you in the room, and then start trying to figure out how is this problem going to be solved. You then have a responsibility to prepare an agenda that is achievable—that can institutionalize the changes you seek—and to engage the other side.”

Opal Tometi, a Nigerian American community activist who is one of the three founders of Black Lives Matter, explained to me that the group has a more diffuse structure

than most civil-rights organizations. One reason for this is to avoid the cult of personality that has plagued black organizations in the past. So the founders asked its membership in Chicago, the president's hometown, whether they should meet with Obama. "They felt—and I think many of our members felt—there wouldn't be the depth of discussion that they wanted to have," Tometi told me. "And if there wasn't that space to have a real heart-to-heart, and if it was just surface level, that it would be more of a disservice to the movement."

Tometi noted that some other activists allied with Black Lives Matter had been planning to attend the meeting, so they felt their views would be represented. Nevertheless, Black Lives Matter sees itself as engaged in a protest against the treatment of black people by the American state, and so Tometi and much of the group's leadership, concerned about being used for a photo op by the very body they were protesting, opted not to go.

When I asked Obama about this perspective, he fluctuated between understanding where the activists were coming from and being hurt by such brush-offs. "I think that where I've gotten frustrated during the course of my presidency has never been because I was getting pushed too hard by activists to see the justness of a cause or the essence of an issue," he said. "I think where I got frustrated at times was the belief that the president can do anything if he just decides he wants to do it. And that sort of lack of awareness on the part of an activist about the constraints of our political system and the constraints on this office, I think, sometimes would leave me to mutter under my breath. Very rarely did I lose it publicly. Usually I'd just smile."

He laughed, then continued, "The reason I say that is because those are the times where sometimes you feel actually a little bit hurt. Because you feel like saying to these folks, '[Don't] you think if I could do it, I [would] have just done it? Do you think that the only problem is that I don't care enough about the plight of poor people, or gay people?'"

I asked Obama whether he thought that perhaps protesters' distrust of the powers that be could ultimately be healthy. "Yes," he said. "Which is why I don't get too hurt. I mean, I think there is a benefit to wanting to hold power's feet to the fire until you actually see the goods. I get that. And I think it is important. And frankly, sometimes it's useful for activists just to be out there to keep you mindful and not get complacent, even if ultimately you think some of their criticism is misguided."

Obama himself was an activist and a community organizer, albeit for only two years—but he is not, by temperament, a protester. He is a consensus-builder; consensus, he believes, ultimately drives what gets done. He understands the emotional power of protest, the need to vent before authority—but that kind of approach does not come naturally to him. Regarding reparations, he said, “Sometimes I wonder how much of these debates have to do with the desire, the legitimate desire, for that history to be recognized. Because there is a psychic power to the recognition that is not satisfied with a universal program; it’s not satisfied by the Affordable Care Act, or an expansion of Pell Grants, or an expansion of the earned-income tax credit.” These kinds of programs, effective and disproportionately beneficial to black people though they may be, don’t “speak to the hurt, and the sense of injustice, and the self-doubt that arises out of the fact that [African Americans] are behind now, and it makes us sometimes feel as if there must be something wrong with us—unless you’re able to see the history and say, ‘It’s amazing we got this far given what we went through.’”

“So in part, I think the argument sometimes that I’ve had with folks who are much more interested in sort of race-specific programs is less an argument about what is practically achievable and sometimes maybe more an argument of ‘We want society to see what’s happened and internalize it and answer it in demonstrable ways.’ And those impulses I very much understand—but my hope would be that as we’re moving through the world right now, we’re able to get that psychological or emotional peace by seeing very concretely our kids doing better and being more hopeful and having greater opportunities.”

Obama saw—at least at that moment, before the election of Donald Trump—a straight path to that world. “Just play this out as a thought experiment,” he said. “Imagine if you had genuine, high-quality early-childhood education for every child, and suddenly every black child in America—but also every poor white child or Latino [child], but just stick with every black child in America—is getting a really good education. And they’re graduating from high school at the same rates that whites are, and they are going to college at the same rates that whites are, and they are able to afford college at the same rates because the government has universal programs that say that you’re not going to be barred from school just because of how much money your parents have.

“So now they’re all graduating. And let’s also say that the Justice Department and the courts are making sure, as I’ve said in a speech before, that when Jamal sends his résumé in, he’s getting treated the same as when Johnny sends his résumé in. Now,

are we going to have suddenly the same number of CEOs, billionaires, etc., as the white community? In 10 years? Probably not, maybe not even in 20 years.

“But I guarantee you that we would be thriving, we would be succeeding. We wouldn’t have huge numbers of young African American men in jail. We’d have more family formation as college-graduated girls are meeting boys who are their peers, which then in turn means the next generation of kids are growing up that much better. And suddenly you’ve got a whole generation that’s in a position to start using the incredible creativity that we see in music, and sports, and frankly even on the streets, channeled into starting all kinds of businesses. I feel pretty good about our odds in that situation.”

The thought experiment doesn’t hold up. The programs Obama favored would advance white America too—and without a specific commitment to equality, there is no guarantee that the programs would eschew discrimination. Obama’s solution relies on a goodwill that his own personal history tells him exists in the larger country. My own history tells me something different. The large numbers of black men in jail, for instance, are not just the result of poor policy, but of not seeing those men as human.

When President Obama and I had this conversation, the target he was aiming to reach seemed to me to be many generations away, and now—as President-Elect Trump prepares for office—seems even many more generations off. Obama’s accomplishments were real: a \$1 billion settlement on behalf of black farmers, a Justice Department that exposed Ferguson’s municipal plunder, the increased availability of Pell Grants (and their availability to some prisoners), and the slashing of the crack/cocaine disparity in sentencing guidelines, to name just a few. Obama was also the first sitting president to visit a federal prison. There was a feeling that he’d erected a foundation upon which further progressive policy could be built. It’s tempting to say that foundation is now endangered. The truth is, it was never safe.

V.

“THEY RODE THE TIGER”

Obama’s greatest misstep was born directly out of his greatest insight. Only Obama, a black man who emerged from the best of white America, and thus could sincerely trust white America, could be so certain that he could achieve broad national appeal. And yet only a black man with that same biography could underestimate his opposition’s re-

solve to destroy him. In some sense an Obama presidency could never have succeeded along the normal presidential lines; he needed a partner, or partners, in Congress who could put governance above party. But he struggled to win over even some of his own allies. Ben Nelson, the Democratic senator from Nebraska whom Obama helped elect, became an obstacle to health-care reform. Joe Lieberman, whom Obama saved from retribution at the hands of Senate Democrats after Lieberman campaigned for Obama's 2008 opponent, John McCain, similarly obstructed Obamacare. Among Republicans, senators who had seemed amenable to Obama's agenda—Chuck Grassley, Susan Collins, Richard Lugar, Olympia Snowe—rebuffed him repeatedly.

The obstruction grew out of narrow political incentives. “If Republicans didn’t cooperate,” Obama told me, “and there was not a portrait of bipartisan cooperation and a functional federal government, then the party in power would pay the price and they could win back the Senate and/or the House. That wasn’t an inaccurate political calculation.”

Obama is not sure of the degree to which individual racism played into this calculation. “I do remember watching Bill Clinton get impeached and Hillary Clinton being accused of killing Vince Foster,” he said. “And if you ask them, I’m sure they would say, ‘No, actually what you’re experiencing is not because you’re black, it’s because you’re a Democrat.’”

But personal animus is just one manifestation of racism; arguably the more profound animosity occurs at the level of interests. The most recent Congress boasted 138 members from the states that comprised the old Confederacy. Of the 101 Republicans in that group, 96 are white and one is black. Of the 37 Democrats, 18 are black and 15 are white. There are no white congressional Democrats in the Deep South. Exit polls in Mississippi in 2008 found that 96 percent of voters who described themselves as Republicans were white. The Republican Party is not simply the party of whites, but the preferred party of whites who identify their interest as defending the historical privileges of whiteness. The researchers Josh Pasek, Jon A. Krosnick, and Trevor Thompson found that in 2012, 32 percent of Democrats held antiblack views, while 79 percent of Republicans did. These attitudes could even spill over to white Democratic politicians, because they are seen as representing the party of blacks. Studying the 2016 election, the political scientist Philip Klinkner found that the most predictive question for understanding whether a voter favored Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump was “Is Barack Obama a Muslim?”

In our conversations, Obama said he didn't doubt that there was a sincerely nonracist states'-rights contingent of the GOP. And yet he suspected that there might be more to it. "A rudimentary knowledge of American history tells you that the relationship between the federal government and the states was very much mixed up with attitudes towards slavery, attitudes towards Jim Crow, attitudes towards antipoverty programs and who benefited and who didn't," he said.

"And so I'm careful not to attribute any particular resistance or slight or opposition to race. But what I do believe is that if somebody didn't have a problem with their daddy being employed by the federal government, and didn't have a problem with the Tennessee Valley Authority electrifying certain communities, and didn't have a problem with the interstate highway system being built, and didn't have a problem with the GI Bill, and didn't have a problem with the [Federal Housing Administration] subsidizing the suburbanization of America, and that all helped you build wealth and create a middle class—and then suddenly as soon as African Americans or Latinos are interested in availing themselves of those same mechanisms as ladders into the middle class, you now have a violent opposition to them—then I think you at least have to ask yourself the question of how consistent you are, and what's different, and what's changed."

Racism greeted Obama in both his primary and general-election campaigns in 2008. Photos were circulated of him in Somali garb. Rush Limbaugh dubbed him "Barack the Magic Negro." Roger Stone, who would go on to advise the Trump campaign, claimed that Michelle Obama could be heard on tape yelling "Whitey." Detractors circulated emails claiming that the future first lady had written a racist senior thesis while at Princeton. A fifth of all West Virginia Democratic-primary voters in 2008 openly admitted that race had influenced their vote. Hillary Clinton trounced him 67 to 26 percent.

After Obama won the presidency in defiance of these racial headwinds, traffic to the white-supremacist website Stormfront increased sixfold. Before the election, in August, just before the Democratic National Convention, the FBI uncovered an assassination plot hatched by white supremacists in Denver. Mainstream conservative publications floated the notion that Obama's memoir was too "stylish and penetrating" to have been written by the candidate, and found a plausible ghostwriter in the radical (and white) former Weatherman Bill Ayers. A Republican women's club in California dispensed "Obama Bucks" featuring slices of watermelon, ribs, and fried chicken. At the Values Voter Summit that year, conventioners hawked "Obama Waffles," a waffle mix whose box featured a bug-eyed caricature of the candidate. Fake

hip-hop lyrics were scrawled on the side (“Barry’s Bling Bling Waffle Ring”) and on the top, the same caricature was granted a turban and tagged with the instructions “Point box toward Mecca for tastier waffles.” The display was denounced by the summit’s sponsor, the Family Research Council. One would be forgiven for meeting this denunciation with guffaws: The council’s president, Tony Perkins, had once addressed the white-supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens with a Confederate flag draped behind him. By 2015, Perkins had deemed the debate over Obama’s birth certificate “legitimate” and was saying that it “makes sense” to conclude that Obama was actually a Muslim.

By then, birtherism—inflamed in large part by a real-estate mogul and reality-TV star named Donald Trump—had overtaken the Republican rank and file. In 2015, one poll found that 54 percent of GOP voters thought Obama was a Muslim. Only 29 percent believed he’d been born in America.

Still, in 2008, Obama had been elected. His supporters rejoiced. As Jay-Z commemorated the occasion:

My president is black, in fact he’s half-white,
So even in a racist mind, he’s half-right.

Not quite. A month after Obama entered the White House, a CNBC personality named Rick Santelli took to the trading floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and denounced the president’s efforts to help homeowners endangered by the housing crisis. “How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills?” Santelli asked the assembled traders. He asserted that Obama should “reward people that could carry the water” as opposed to those who “drink the water,” and denounced those in danger of foreclosure as “losers.” Race was implicit in Santelli’s harangue—the housing crisis and predatory lending had devastated black communities and expanded the wealth gap—and it culminated with a call for a “Tea Party” to resist the Obama presidency. In fact, right-wing ideologues had been planning just such a resistance for decades. They would eagerly answer Santelli’s call.

ONE OF THE intellectual forerunners of the Tea Party is said to be Ron Paul, the heterodox two-time Republican presidential candidate, who opposed the war in Iraq and championed civil liberties. On other matters, Paul was more traditional. Throughout the ’90s, he published a series of racist newsletters that referred to New York City as “Welfaria,” called Martin Luther King Jr. Day “Hate

Whitey Day,” and asserted that 95 percent of black males in Washington, D.C., were either “semi-criminal or entirely criminal.” Paul’s apologists have claimed that he had no real connection to the newsletters, even though virtually all of them were published in his name (“The Ron Paul Survival Report,” “Ron Paul Political Report,” “Dr. Ron Paul’s Freedom Report”) and written in his voice. Either way, the views of the newsletters have found their expression in his ideological comrades. Throughout Obama’s first term, Tea Party activists voiced their complaints in racist terms. Activists brandished signs warning that Obama would implement “white slavery,” waved the Confederate flag, depicted Obama as a witch doctor, and issued calls for him to “go back to Kenya.” Tea Party supporters wrote “satirical” letters in the name of “We Colored People” and stoked the flames of birtherism. One of the Tea Party’s most prominent sympathizers, the radio host Laura Ingraham, wrote a racist tract depicting Michelle Obama gorging herself on ribs, while Glenn Beck said the president was a “racist” with a “deep-seated hatred for white people.” The Tea Party’s leading exponent, Andrew Breitbart, engineered the smearing of Shirley Sherrod, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s director of rural development for Georgia, publishing egregiously misleading videos that wrongly made her appear to be engaging in anti-white racist invective, which led to her dismissal. (In a rare act of cowardice, the Obama administration cravenly submitted to this effort.)

In those rare moments when Obama made any sort of comment attacking racism, firestorms threatened to consume his governing agenda. When, in July 2009, the president objected to the arrest of the eminent Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. while he was trying to get into his own house, pointing out that the officer had “acted stupidly,” a third of whites said the remark made them feel less favorably toward the president, and nearly two-thirds claimed that Obama had “acted stupidly” by commenting. A chastened Obama then determined to make sure his public statements on race were no longer mere riffs but designed to have an achievable effect. This was smart, but still the invective came. During Obama’s 2009 address on health care before a joint session of Congress, Joe Wilson, a Republican congressman from South Carolina, incredibly, and in defiance of precedent and decorum, disrupted the proceedings by crying out “You lie!” A Missouri congressman equated Obama with a monkey. A California GOP official took up the theme and emailed her friends an image depicting Obama as a chimp, with the accompanying text explaining, “Now you know why [there’s] no birth certificate!” Former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin assessed the president’s foreign policy as a “shuck and jive shtick.” Newt Gingrich dubbed him the “food-stamp president.” The rhetorical attacks on Obama were matched by a very real attack on his political

base—in 2011 and 2012, 19 states enacted voting restrictions that made it harder for African Americans to vote.

Yet in 2012, as in 2008, Obama won anyway. Prior to the election, Obama, ever the optimist, had claimed that intransigent Republicans would decide to work with him to advance the country. No such collaboration was in the offing. Instead, legislation ground to a halt and familiar themes resurfaced. An Idaho GOP official posted a photo on Facebook depicting a trap waiting for Obama. The bait was a slice of watermelon. The caption read, “Breaking: The secret service just uncovered a plot to kidnap the president. More details as we get them ...” In 2014, conservatives assembled in support of Cliven Bundy’s armed protest against federal grazing fees. As reporters descended on the Bundy ranch in Nevada, Bundy offered his opinions on “the Negro.” “They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never learned how to pick cotton,” Bundy explained. “And I’ve often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn’t get no more freedom. They got less freedom.”

“THEY RODE THE TIGER. AND NOW THE TIGER IS EATING THEM,” DAVID AXELROD TOLD ME, SPEAKING OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY.

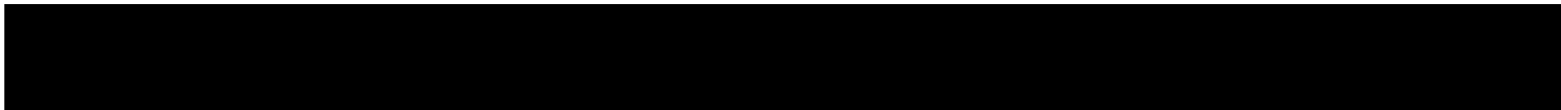


That same year, in the wake of Michael Brown’s death, the Justice Department opened an investigation into the police department in Ferguson, Missouri. It found a city that, through racial profiling, arbitrary fines, and wanton harassment, had exploited law enforcement for the purposes of municipal plunder. The plunder was sanctified by racist humor dispensed via internal emails among the police that later came to light. The president of the United States, who during his first year in office had reportedly received three times the number of death threats of any of his predecessors, was a repeat target.

Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to understand the Tea Party protests, and the 2016 presidential candidacy of Donald Trump, which ultimately emerged out of

them. One theory popular among (primarily) white intellectuals of varying political persuasions held that this response was largely the discontented rumblings of a white working class threatened by the menace of globalization and crony capitalism. Dismissing these rumblings as racism was said to condescend to this proletariat, which had long suffered the slings and arrows of coastal elites, heartless technocrats, and reformist snobs. Racism was not something to be coolly and empirically assessed but a slander upon the working man. Deindustrialization, globalization, and broad income inequality are real. And they have landed with at least as great a force upon black and Latino people in our country as upon white people. And yet these groups were strangely unrepresented in this new populism.

THERE ARE NO CLEAN VICTORIES FOR BLACK PEOPLE, NOR, PERHAPS, FOR ANY PEOPLE.



Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, political scientists at the University of Washington and UCLA, respectively, have found a relatively strong relationship between racism and Tea Party membership. “Whites are less likely to be drawn to the Tea Party for material reasons, suggesting that, relative to other groups, it’s really more about social prestige,” they say. The notion that the Tea Party represented the righteous, if unfocused, anger of an aggrieved class allowed everyone from leftists to neoliberals to white nationalists to avoid a horrifying and simple reality: A significant swath of this country did not like the fact that their president was black, and that swath was not composed of those most damaged by an unquestioned faith in the markets. Far better to imagine the grievance put upon the president as the ghost of shambling factories and defunct union halls, as opposed to what it really was—a movement inaugurated by ardent and frightened white capitalists, raging from the commodities-trading floor of one of the great financial centers of the world.

That movement came into full bloom in the summer of 2015, with the candidacy of Donald Trump, a man who’d risen to political prominence by peddling the racist myth that the president was not American. It was birtherism—not trade, not jobs, not isolationism—that launched Trump’s foray into electoral politics. Having risen unexpectedly on this basis into the stratosphere of Republican politics, Trump spent the

campaign freely and liberally trafficking in misogyny, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. And on November 8, 2016, he won election to the presidency. Historians will spend the next century analyzing how a country with such allegedly grand democratic traditions was, so swiftly and so easily, brought to the brink of fascism. But one needn't stretch too far to conclude that an eight-year campaign of consistent and open racism aimed at the leader of the free world helped clear the way.

"They rode the tiger. And now the tiger is eating them," David Axelrod, speaking of the Republican Party, told me. That was in October. His words proved too optimistic. The tiger would devour us all.

VI.

"WHEN YOU LEFT, YOU TOOK ALL OF ME WITH YOU"

One Saturday morning last May, I joined the presidential motorcade as it slipped out of the southern gate of the White House. A mostly white crowd had assembled. As the motorcade drove by, people cheered, held up their smartphones to record the procession, and waved American flags. To be within feet of the president seemed like the thrill of their lives. I was astounded. An old euphoria, which I could not immediately place, gathered up in me. And then I remembered, it was what I felt through much of 2008, as I watched Barack Obama's star shoot across the political sky. I had never seen so many white people cheer on a black man who was neither an athlete nor an entertainer. And it seemed that they loved him for this, and I thought in those days, which now feel so long ago, that they might then love me, too, and love my wife, and love my child, and love us all in the manner that the God they so fervently cited had commanded. I had been raised amid a people who wanted badly to believe in the possibility of a Barack Obama, even as their very lives argued against that possibility. So they would praise Martin Luther King Jr. in one breath and curse the white man, "the Great Deceiver," in the next. Then came Obama and the Obama family, and they were black and beautiful in all the ways we aspired to be, and all that love was showered upon them. But as Obama's motorcade approached its destination—Howard University, where he would give the commencement address—the complexion of the crowd darkened, and I understood that the love was specific, that even if it allowed Barack Obama, even if it allowed the luckiest of us, to defy the boundaries, then the masses of us, in cities like this one, would still enjoy no such feat.

These were our fitful, spasmodic years.

We were launched into the Obama era with no notion of what to expect, if only because a black presidency had seemed such a dubious proposition. There was no preparation, because it would have meant preparing for the impossible. There were few assessments of its potential import, because such assessments were regarded as speculative fiction. In retrospect it all makes sense, and one can see a jagged but real political lineage running through black Chicago. It originates in Oscar Stanton De Priest; continues through Congressman William Dawson, who, under Roosevelt, switched from the Republican to the Democratic Party; crescendos with the legendary Harold Washington; rises still with Jesse Jackson's 1988 victory in Michigan's Democratic caucuses; rises again with Carol Moseley Braun's triumph; and reaches its recent apex with the election of Barack Obama. If the lineage is apparent in hindsight, so are the limits of presidential power. For a century after emancipation, quasi-slavery haunted the South. And more than half a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools throughout much of this country remain segregated.

There are no clean victories for black people, nor, perhaps, for any people. The presidency of Barack Obama is no different. One can now say that an African American individual can rise to the same level as a white individual, and yet also say that the number of black individuals who actually qualify for that status will be small. One thinks of Serena Williams, whose dominance and stunning achievements can't, in and of themselves, ensure equal access to tennis facilities for young black girls. The gate is open and yet so very far away.

I felt a mix of pride and amazement walking onto Howard's campus that day. Howard alumni, of which I am one, are an obnoxious fraternity, known for yelling the school chant across city blocks, sneering at other historically black colleges and universities, and condescending to black graduates of predominantly white institutions. I like to think I am more reserved, but I felt an immense satisfaction in being in the library where I had once found my history, and now found myself with the first black president of the United States. It seemed providential that he would give the commencement address here in his last year. The same pride I felt radiated out across the Yard, the large green patch in the main area of the campus where the ceremony would take place. When Obama walked out, the audience exploded, and when the time came for the color guard to present arms, a chant arose: "O-Ba-Ma! O-Ba-Ma! O-Ba-Ma!"

He gave a good speech that day, paying heed to Howard's rituals, calling out its famous alumni, shouting out the university's various dormitories, and urging young people to vote. (His usual riff on respectability politics was missing.) But I think he could have



Obama campaigning in central Florida before the unthinkable—Donald Trump’s victory—happened

stood before that crowd, smiled, and said “Good luck,” and they would have loved him anyway. He was their champion, and this was evident in the smallest of things. The national anthem was played first, but then came the black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” As the lyrics rang out over the crowd, the students held up the black-power fist—a symbol of defiance before power. And yet here, in the face of a black man in his last year in power, it scanned not as a protest, but as a salute.

Six months later the awful price of a black presidency would be known to those students, even as the country seemed determined not to acknowledge it. In the days after Donald Trump’s victory, there would be an insistence that something as “simple” as racism could not explain it. As if enslavement had nothing to do with global economics, or as if lynchings said nothing about the idea of women as property. As though the past 400 years could be reduced to the irrational resentment of full lips. No. Racism is never simple. And there was nothing simple about what was coming, or about Obama, the man who had unwittingly summoned this future into being.

It was said that the Americans who'd supported Trump were victims of liberal condescension. The word *racist* would be dismissed as a profane slur put upon the common man, as opposed to an accurate description of actual men. "We simply don't yet know how much racism or misogyny motivated Trump voters," David Brooks would write in *The New York Times*. "If you were stuck in a jobless town, watching your friends OD on opiates, scrambling every month to pay the electric bill, and then along came a guy who seemed able to fix your problems and hear your voice, maybe you would stomach some ugliness, too." This strikes me as perfectly logical. Indeed, it could apply just as well to Louis Farrakhan's appeal to the black poor and working class. But whereas the followers of an Islamophobic white nationalist enjoy the sympathy that must always greet the salt of the earth, the followers of an anti-Semitic black nationalist endure the scorn that must ever greet the children of the enslaved.

I STILL WANT OBAMA TO BE RIGHT. I STILL WOULD LIKE TO FOLD MYSELF INTO THE DREAM. THIS WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE.

Much would be made of blue-collar voters in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan who'd pulled the lever for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and then for Trump in 2016. Surely these voters disproved racism as an explanatory force. It's still not clear how many individual voters actually flipped. But the underlying presumption—that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama could be swapped in for each other—exhibited a problem. Clinton was a candidate who'd won one competitive political race in her life, whose political instincts were questioned by her own advisers, who took more than half a million dollars in speaking fees from an investment bank because it was "what they offered," who proposed to bring back to the White House a former president dogged by allegations of rape and sexual harassment. Obama was a candidate who'd become only the third black senator in the modern era; who'd twice been elected president, each time flipping red and purple states; who'd run one of the most scandal-free administrations in recent memory. Imagine an African American facsimile of Hillary Clinton: She would never be the nominee of a major political party and likely would not be in national politics at all.

Pointing to citizens who voted for both Obama and Trump does not disprove racism; it evinces it. To secure the White House, Obama needed to be a Harvard-trained lawyer with a decade of political experience and an incredible gift for speaking to cross sections of the country; Donald Trump needed only money and white bluster.

In the week after the election, I was a mess. I had not seen my wife in two weeks. I was on deadline for this article. My son was struggling in school. The house was in disarray. I played Marvin Gaye endlessly—"When you left, you took all of me with you." Friends began to darkly recall the ghosts of post-Reconstruction. The election of Donald Trump confirmed everything I knew of my country and none of what I could accept. The idea that America would follow its first black president with Donald Trump accorded with its history. I was shocked at my own shock. I had wanted Obama to be right.

I still want Obama to be right. I still would like to fold myself into the dream. This will not be possible.

By some cosmic coincidence, a week after the election I received a portion of my father's FBI file. My father had grown up poor in Philadelphia. His father was struck dead on the street. His grandfather was crushed to death in a meatpacking plant. He'd served his country in Vietnam, gotten radicalized there, and joined the Black Panther Party, which brought him to the attention of J. Edgar Hoover. A memo written to the FBI director was "submitted aimed at discrediting WILLIAM PAUL COATES, Acting Captain of the BPP, Baltimore." The memo proposed that a fake letter be sent to the Panthers' co-founder Huey P. Newton. The fake letter accused my father of being an informant and concluded, "I want somethin done with this bootlikin facist pig nigger and I want it done now." The words *somethin done* need little interpretation. The Panthers were eventually consumed by an internecine war instigated by the FBI, one in which being labeled a police informant was a death sentence.

A few hours after I saw this file, I had my last conversation with the president. I asked him how his optimism was holding up, given Trump's victory. He confessed to being surprised at the outcome but said that it was tough to "draw a grand theory from it, because there were some very unusual circumstances." He pointed to both candidates' high negatives, the media coverage, and a "dispirited" electorate. But he said that his general optimism about the shape of American history remained unchanged. "To be optimistic about the long-term trends of the United States doesn't mean that everything is going to go in a smooth, direct, straight line," he said. "It goes forward sometimes, sometimes it goes back, sometimes it goes sideways, sometimes it zigs and zags."

I thought of Hoover's FBI, which harassed three generations of black activists, from Marcus Garvey's black nationalists to Martin Luther King Jr.'s integrationists to Huey Newton's Black Panthers, including my father. And I thought of the enormous power accrued to the presidency in the post-9/11 era—the power to obtain American citizens' phone records en masse, to access their emails, to detain them indefinitely. I asked the president whether it was all worth it. Whether this generation of black activists and their allies should be afraid.

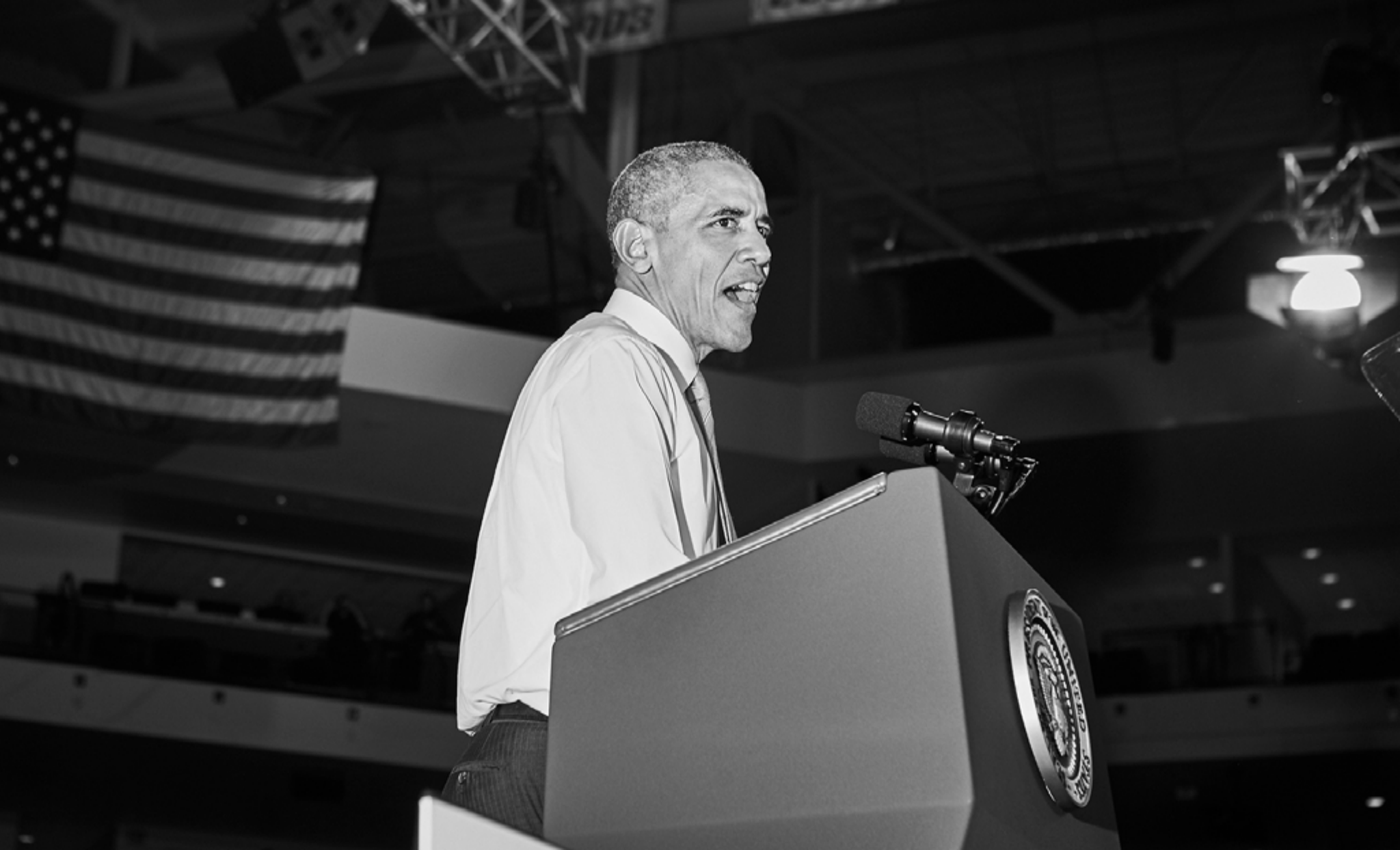
“Keep in mind that the capacity of the NSA, or other surveillance tools, are specifically prohibited from being applied to U.S. citizens or U.S. persons without specific evidence of links to terrorist activity or, you know, other foreign-related activity,” he said. “So, you know, I think this whole story line that somehow Big Brother has massively expanded and now that a new president is in place it's this loaded gun ready to be used on domestic dissent is just not accurate.”

He counseled vigilance, “because the possibility of abuse by government officials always exists. The issue is not going to be that there are new tools available; the issue is making sure that the incoming administration, like my administration, takes the constraints on how we deal with U.S. citizens and persons seriously.” This answer did not fill me with confidence. The next day, President-Elect Trump offered Lieutenant General Michael Flynn the post of national-security adviser and picked Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama as his nominee for attorney general. Last February, Flynn tweeted, “Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL” and linked to a YouTube video that declared followers of Islam want “80 percent of humanity enslaved or exterminated.” Sessions had once been accused of calling a black lawyer “boy,” claiming that a white lawyer who represented black clients was a disgrace to his race, and joking that he thought the Ku Klux Klan “was okay until I found out they smoked pot.” I felt then that I knew what was coming—more Freddie Grays, more Rekia Boyds, more informants and undercover officers sent to infiltrate mosques.

And I also knew that the man who could not countenance such a thing in his America had been responsible for the only time in my life when I felt, as the first lady had once said, proud of my country, and I knew that it was his very lack of countenance, his incredible faith, his improbable trust in his countrymen, that had made that feeling possible. The feeling was that little black boy touching the president's hair. It was watching Obama on the campaign trail, always expecting the worst and amazed that the worst never happened. It was how I'd felt seeing Barack and Michelle during the inauguration, the car slow-dragging down Pennsylvania Avenue, the crowd cheering,

and then the two of them rising up out of the limo, rising up from fear, smiling, waving, defying despair, defying history, defying gravity. A

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a national correspondent for The Atlantic. His most recent book, Between the World and Me, won the National Book Award for Nonfiction.



IAN ALLEN

“The Filter ... Is Powerful”: Obama on Race, Media, and What It Took to Win

The first in a series of interviews between Ta-Nehisi Coates and the president

In “[My President Was Black](#),” Ta-Nehisi Coates examined Barack Obama’s tenure in office and his legacy. The story was built, in part, around a series of conversations he had with the president. This is a transcript of the first of those four encounters, which took place on September 27, 2016. Valerie Jarrett, the senior adviser to the president, was also present.

Barack Obama: All right, where do you want to start?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You know, I was thinking about something today that I heard, and I wanted to see if you could confirm it, and if you could, whether you could talk about it. I was told that the night of the inauguration it was a huge, huge party here. Is that correct?

Obama: [Chuckles] That would be correct.

Valerie Jarrett: The second inauguration ...

Obama: You're talking about the second inauguration?

Coates: Was it the second? Celebrities, maybe Stevie Wonder and Usher?

Obama: First inauguration we had—you know, this is a good example of when you first arrive, you don't know what you're supposed to do. So there are all these state balls that take place, and we sort of assumed—we were told—well, you should go to all the balls. So ...

Coates: Did you try that? Did you try to go to all of them?

Obama: We went to all of them. And you do a dance at each one.

Coates: Fifty?

Obama: No, no, not every state has one, but we went to 10 or 12. And by the time we were done, it was like 1 o'clock, so we had Wynton Marsalis here playing, and people had been hanging out, but by the time we got back Michelle's feet were all hurting and swollen up, and I was exhausted, and we hung out here probably for half an hour, and went to bed. Now, the second inauguration, we had it a little more figured out. So we did, like, three balls and then got back here and had a DJ and, yeah, Usher and Stevie.

Coates: How late did you go?

Obama: Three-thirty? Four o'clock?

Coates: Was the second one more joyous for you—

Obama: Yes.

Coates: It's one thing you're the first black president, but it's like "Wow, this really—"

Obama: Yeah. I think the way to think about it is the first inauguration is like your wedding in the sense that it is a joyous moment and occasion, but you're so busy and

kind of stressed making sure that Aunt Such-and-Such and Uncle So-and-So and cousins are getting tickets that it ends up going by without you even really knowing what's happening. The second one you could savor. But partly, as you indicated, for political reasons as well. Because we had gone through four of the toughest years this country has gone through since the '30s. And to be able to win a majority of the vote the second time indicated that we had worked with a broad cross section of the country and they trusted what we were trying to do. And it wasn't just a singular feel-good moment; it was an affirmation that people thought we had done a good job.

Coates: I think for those of us—and I certainly threw myself in this camp—I was telling Valerie the other day, the idea of a black president was a joke, in every black stand-up comic routine everywhere—

Obama: Right. A friend of mine gave me *Head of State*—remember [Chris Rock] and Bernie Mac?—when we were still running. Said, “Man, you got to see *Head of State*.” [Laughter]

Coates: Yeah, this was like a laugh-fest. But I think one of the things that did distinguish you was the ability to see it and to have the vision that, yes, this could happen, and then to have it again. I'm speaking specifically in terms of race ... There were those of us who said, “It's no way.” And to see it the first and second time must have really reaffirmed a lot of what you thought.

Obama: As I said, the second time, people had seen me work. They had seen me have victories, they had seen me have defeats, they had seen me make mistakes, they had seen me at some high moments but also some low moments. So they knew me, at that point, in the round. I wasn't just a projection of whatever they hoped for. You know, we always cautioned each other, in the '08 race, that people were projecting so much onto my campaign—you know, that this would solve every racial problem, or that this indicated that we were beyond race, or that we were going to magically usher in a new era of progressive politics, and that we had vanquished all the backward-looking politics of the past.

And for us to then be able to grind it out, to figure out how do we get out of this Great Recession, and what's the process where we can finally get health care done even if it's not pretty, and how do we deal with winding down two wars, and how do we clean up after an administration to reinvigorate things like the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. People had seen all that, and then had to make a judgment: Do we

want to continue on this course, and do we continue to have faith in this person? And so it is true that, for me at least, in some ways the first race was lightning in a bottle. I saw it, I envisioned the possibility of it, but everything converged in a way that you couldn't duplicate. The second race as a consequence felt more solid, because it was harder. And you know we didn't have tailwinds, we had a lot more headwinds.

Coates: Yeah, I have my own theories about this, and I wonder what yours are. Why were you able to see it?

Obama: The first time?

Coates: Yeah. You said you were able to envision the possibility. Why? I mean, when you think about yourself—because obviously, as you know, a lot of African Americans could not—what's the difference?

Obama: Yeah. I'd say a couple things. The first was that I had been elected as the senator of Illinois, and Illinois is the most demographically representative state in the country. If you took all the percentages of black, white, Latino, rural, urban, agricultural, manufacturing—[if] you took that cross section across the country, and you shrank it, it would be Illinois. So when I ran for the Senate I had to go into southern Illinois, downstate Illinois, farming communities—some with very tough racial histories, some areas where there just were no African Americans of any number, and I had seen my ability to connect with those communities and those people against some pretty formidable opponents.

When I ran for the Senate, I was one of seven candidates. One of them, Dan Hynes, was already the state comptroller, was the son of the former Senate president and chair of the Democratic Party, a well-established Irish family in the state, who got the endorsement, I think, of 100 out of 103 county chairs as well as the AFL-CIO endorsement. And you had a multimillionaire hedge-fund manager who was spending huge amounts of money. And when we won that race, not just an African American from Chicago, but an African American with an exotic history and a name Barack Hussein Obama, could connect with and appeal to a much broader audience.

And then, keep in mind, that the response of the 2004 convention speech was admittedly over the top, and so I had for two years seen the response I would get when we traveled all around the country. I had campaigned on behalf of other Democrats. Ben Nelson, one of the most conservative Democrats in the Senate, from Nebraska,

would only bring in one national Democrat to campaign for him, because typically he tried to distance himself from Democrats—and it was me. And so part of the reason I was willing to run and saw the possibility was that I had had two years in which we were generating enormous crowds all across the country—and the majority of those crowds were not African American; and they were in pretty remote places, or unlikely places. They weren't just big cities or they weren't just liberal enclaves. So what that told me was, it was possible.

Coates: Did you have doubts?

Obama: Yes.

Coates: You did have doubts?

Obama: Look, I think Valerie remembers us sitting around our kitchen table—a group of friends of mine, some political advisers, Michelle—and I think our basic assessment was maybe we had a 20, 25 percent chance of winning.

Coates: The presidency?

Obama: The presidency, yeah. Because I did think given the problems President Bush had had, that whoever won the Democratic nomination would win the presidency. And so the issue really was, could I get the nomination, particularly with a formidable candidate like Hillary Clinton already preparing to run? And my view was not that this was a sure thing, but what I never doubted was my ability to get white support.

Coates: You never doubted that?

Obama: No. And I think that in addition to the proof of my Senate race, if you want to go a little deeper, there is no doubt that as a mixed child, as the child of an African and a white woman, who was very close to white grandparents who came from Kansas, that I think the working assumption of discrimination, the working assumption that white people would not treat me right or give me an opportunity, or judge me on the basis of merit—that kind of working assumption is less embedded in my psyche than it is, say, with Michelle. There is a little bit of a biographical element to this. I had as a child seen at least a small cross section of white people, but the people who were closest to me loved me more than anything. And so even as an adult, even by the time I'm 40, 45, 50, that set of memories meant that if I walked into a room and

it's a bunch of white farmers, trade unionists, middle age—I'm not walking in thinking, *Man, I've got to show them that I'm normal*. I walk in there, I think, with a set of assumptions: like, these people look just like my grandparents. And I see the same the same Jell-O mold that my grandmother served, and they've got the same, you know, little stuff on their mantelpieces. And so I am maybe disarming them by just assuming that we're okay. And if anything, my concern had more to do with *I'm really young*. I mean, when I look back at the pictures of me running in '08, I look like a kid. And so my insecurities going into the race had more to do with the fact I had only been in the Senate two years. Three, four years earlier I had been a state legislator, and I was now running for the highest office in the land.

Coates: I want to stay with this for a second. You know, to prepare for this piece I've been going back and reading some of your writings. And one of the things I noticed going through *Dreams From My Father*, which I read a long time ago—it's very different reading it.

Obama: The second time?

Coates: Yeah, and then after eight years. Yeah, and then—

Obama: After seeing how things played out.

Coates: Right. And one of the things I saw in there: Your grandfather has this black dude come over who's interested in his daughter, and he's accepting.

Obama: Yeah, listen, I'm always kind of surprised by that. Like I said, it wasn't Harry Belafonte. This was like an *African* African. And he was like a blue-black brother. Nilotic. [Laughter] And so, yeah, I will always give my grandparents credit for that. I'm not saying they were happy about it. I'm not saying that they were not, after the guy leaves, looking at each other like, 'What the heck?' But whatever misgivings they had, they never expressed to me, never spilled over into how they interacted with me.

Now, part of it, as I say in my book, was we were in this unique environment in Hawaii where I think it was much easier. I don't know if it would have been as easy for them if they were living in Chicago at the time, because the lines just weren't as sharply drawn in Hawaii as they were on the mainland. But I do think that at the end of the day, some of my confidence that people are people and that the very specific historical experience and sociological reality of racism in this country has made for significant differ-

ences between black and white populations, but that people's basic human impulses are the same. I mean, that just grows out of who I am. It's a biological necessity for me to believe that, right? And so my politics ultimately would reflect that.

There's one last point about this, though, that then bears on my presidency that I think I should point out in terms of both my confidence that I could win in '08 but also the fact that I was lucky and maybe a little bit naive: In 2008 I was never subjected to the kind of concentrated vilification of Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, the whole conservative-media ecosystem, and so as a consequence, even for my first two years as a senator I was polling at 70 percent. And it was because people basically saw me unfiltered. I was at a town-hall meeting, or I was talking to people directly, or they had met me, or I would speak at a university or go to a VFW hall. But they weren't seeing some image of me as trying to take away their stuff and give it to black people, and coddle criminals, and all the stereotypes of not just African American politicians but liberal politicians. You started to see that kind of prism being established towards the end of the 2008 race, particularly once Sarah Palin was the nominee. And obviously almost immediately after I was elected, it was deployed in full force. And it had an impact in terms of how a large portion of white voters would see me.

And what that speaks to—and this is something I still strongly believe—is that the suspicion between races, the way it can manifest itself in politics, in part comes out of people's daily interactions and the fact that we're segregated by communities, and by schools, and our churches, and people's memories passed down through generations. But some of it is constructed on a constant basis; it's being created all the time. And I think what I did not fully appreciate when I first came into this office was the degree to which that reality would be the only thing that a large chunk of the electorate, particularly the white electorate, would see.

You know, Bill Clinton told me an interesting story. He went back to Arkansas with a former aide of his when he was governor and when he was running, who ended up running for Congress and was about to retire from Congress. This was one of the last blue dogs. And as they were traveling around, this former member of Congress said to Bill, "You know, I don't think you could win Arkansas today." And he said, "Well, why not?" He says, "You know, when we used to run, you and I would drive around to these small towns and communities out there, and you'd meet with the publisher and editor of the little small-town paper, and you'd have a conversation with them. And they were fairly knowledgeable about some of the issues, and they had their quirks

and blind spots, but basically you as a Democrat could talk about civil rights and the need to invest in communities and they understood that. Except now those papers are all gone and if you go into any bar, you go into any barbershop, the only thing that's on is Fox News." And it has shaped an entire generation of voters and tapped into their deepest anxieties ...

Coates: Just as a counterpoint to that, I wonder about another argument one might make—that you were more likable to these folks before you had power. In other words, once you literally became a black president, that was a real thing. And that activated their fears—

Obama: Yeah, yeah. Look, I think that the— [long pause]

Coates: Like, that they needed Fox News.

Obama: Yeah, but what I would argue would be that the folks for whom that is true—they hadn't voted for me in the first place. I mean, what I'm arguing is not that the concerns or suspicions or fears around changing demographics and increased diversity aren't right there on the surface for a lot of voters. They are. But what I'm saying is that they are shaped and influenced depending on what they see day to day. And they are more malleable, and they can go in a better direction or a worse direction. And if what they are seeing and what they are taking as truth is that this black president is trying to hurt you or take something from you and looking out for "his own," then they will respond differently than if they hear that this president is trying to help you. But it's hard. And here are the issues involved and here are the choices that he's having to make.

There's no better example of that than the whole debate around Obamacare, where the whole way in which it got framed as 'He's trying to take something from you to give free stuff'—in this case free health care but it could also be free phones, or free cheese, or whatever—ended up dominating the debate even in those communities that stood to benefit most from this program. But part of that was the story, the narrative that they were receiving. And people don't have the ability to fact-check and, you know, sort through what's true and what's not, especially on a complicated social program like this.

Coates: Do you think that holds true even in an era right now when we have so much access to information?

Obama: Yeah. You know, in some ways the access to all this information has made it easier to set up narratives that are entirely separate from fact. I mean witness the current election and what Trump is doing. There is no grounding in fact. But because, with all the proliferation of websites, and blogs, and digital content, you can just create your own hermetically sealed world where people are never going outside of their existing assumptions, I think it's a bigger problem, not a worse problem. I guess the point being that: Was there always a certain quotient of people who, even if it was hard for them to admit, would not vote for me because I was African American? Absolutely. That was true when I was running for the U.S. Senate and that would be true if I was trying to catch a cab. Do I believe that's the majority of white Americans? Absolutely not. And I think my elections proved that.

Do I think that good people who are not instinctively afraid or concerned about an African American in authority can be made afraid, and suspicious, and fearful, because of what they are seeing, hearing, and reading if it's not attached to the facts, and evidence, and reality? I think that can have a big impact.

Coates: One of the things that I think also is here is not just your ability to envision the presidency, just the optimism for the country you have in general. I think, at this kind of young age you really saw—if I may say so—the best of white America in a very sort of direct way—

Obama: Right.

Coates: Which I think is very different than most African Americans. I didn't really grow up around white people, but even the abstract construction was as a malignant force in my life, which I had to make my way out of much, much later in life, in my 20s, when I had intimate contact. And I wonder how much of that general optimism you think emanates from your biography. The exposure too, the cosmopolitan nature of all you've seen.

Obama: Yeah. I mean, look, I think all of the above. I think I was deeply loved by my mom and my grandparents. I felt that, and I carried that with me. I spent time outside of the United States, which gives you a perspective on how people of all kinds of different races, and ethnicities, and religions, and backgrounds can figure out ways to divide themselves and try to be superior to others. So that I ended up looking at race in America as one example of a broader human problem, rather than something that was unique and I was trapped in. Right? But I also, I think, benefited from the very

particular era that I was growing up in, because in some ways, the last 55 years—the years I’ve been on this Earth—have a very particular trajectory of progress that is incomplete, is partial, that middle-class African Americans enjoy in ways that really impoverished African Americans do not yet feel. But that trend would feed my optimism as well.

Now, you know, what’s interesting is the work that I did as an organizer in Chicago would help to temper that optimism and ground it so that it wasn’t just a bunch of happy talk. And it’s one of the reasons why, for the generation just ahead of me, I would learn of the anger, frustration, bitterness of my elders and respect it and understand it even if I ultimately did not agree with it.

“IF YOU’RE SO INVESTED IN THE ANGER THAT YOU DON’T SEE WHEN SOMEBODY IS PUTTING OUT THEIR HAND IN A SINCERE GESTURE OF FRIENDSHIP, THEN YOU’VE NOW BECOME YOUR OWN JAILER.”



Coates: Did you right off the bat, when you first encountered it?

Obama: Yeah. And part of it was just because, you know, I had sort of steeped myself in it, although as still an intellectual exercise. I remember reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and I remember reading it, even as a young person, and saying to myself, *Now, if this had happened to me, I’d have a very different attitude*. Right? And that’s part of what I tried to explain in my race speech in Philadelphia when the Reverend Wright controversies came out. He’s of a different generation. He had different experiences. And that sense of being trapped and caged and witnessing brilliant people broken by an unjust system—family members beaten or jailed, or just harassed, or unable to realize their potential—could drive you crazy. And so I think I not only was mindful enough of it by the time I had moved to Chicago, but even in my relatively

sheltered and unique circumstances, I had the experiences that every African American has. Which is somebody in front of a restaurant will hand you the keys, thinking you're there to park their car.

Or—I write about this in *Dreams From My Father*—being in a tennis tournament and the tennis coach, who is supposed to look out for all the kids, telling me, 'Don't put your finger on the draw that's been posted about who's playing who, because you might make it dirty.' And when you're 12 years old and look up at some guy, you think: *What?* Or walking into an elevator and having some woman who you know lives on your floor or above you walk out of the elevator because she's worried about riding with you even though you're a kid. So, you know, you have enough there to have a sense of how anger could pool and well up and, in some cases, consume you.

But I also, I think, by that point would have benefited from enough circumstances in which assuming the best in people had paid off—where there had been a teacher who had really been helpful and looked out for me even when I didn't completely deserve it. Or, you know, just witnessing the example of a Dr. King, or an Arthur Ashe. And so I'm coming of age at a time where you've got the strength and defiance of a Malcolm or an Ali, and you've also got the soulfulness and the moral strength of a King. And those things are speaking to each other. They're in a conversation. And you're saying to yourself, *I can draw from both of those traditions*. And there may be times where it is right to be angry and defiant. And there may be times where you've got to give the country and white people the benefit of the doubt. And if you're so eager to give them the benefit of the doubt that they slap you down and you don't know it, that's a problem. But if you're so invested in the anger that you don't see when somebody is putting out their hand in a sincere gesture of friendship, then you've now become your own jailer. It's not just someone else jailing you.

Coates: Right. It occurs to me, obviously, to have our first black president a product of the times, a product of certain things going around, a product in some part of the administration before—but have you ever thought you needed to be a certain person who had not had this sort of trauma at a young age? Who was capable of giving that sort of optimism—that it couldn't just be, okay now the country's ready, Joe Blow Black Dude steps up, and wins, with political gifts, obviously—but I think that optimism sticks out.

Obama: Yeah. Look, I have no doubt that the first African American president had to be somebody who could speak the way I did in the 2004 convention speech about the ideal of what America is. As opposed to—

Coates: What it isn't. What it hadn't done.

Obama: Right. But that's true of just running for president generally. Very rarely has somebody won the presidency based on a dark, grim vision of what America is.

Coates: Well, we're getting close.

Obama: Right. Well, we'll see my proposition tested in this election cycle. Maybe the closest is Nixon, who employed the southern strategy and surfed the backlash coming out of both the antiwar movement and the civil-rights movement. But as a general proposition, it's hard to run for president by telling people how terrible things are. Because at some level what the people want to feel is that the person leading them sees the best in them. And so, did the innate optimism that I carried with me both because of my upbringing and maybe just temperament help? Absolutely. But I'm not sure it had to be me. I've said before that Deval Patrick could have been the person who broke that particular barrier back in 2008. And it so happened that he had just run for governor and felt committed to finishing up his term. But he has the gifts and I think the persona that would have appealed at that time to the American public. And there are probably some other figures as well who might have pulled it off.

“THERE’VE BEEN 43 OTHER PRESIDENTS. I DON’T REMEMBER THE ISSUE OF WHERE SOMEBODY WAS BORN EVER COMING UP BEFORE.”



Coates: How did you feel when that optimism was directly challenged? I was telling Valerie this the other day: We're at home watching the State of the Union and some guy stands up and yells, "You lie."

Obama: [Laughing] Yeah, that was something.

Coates: And this is a guy from South Carolina—we know about South Carolina, he's confirming everything we feel—

Obama: Yeah, that was something. I still remember looking at him like, *Really? what are you doing? Sit down.*

Coates: Were you angry?

Obama: You know, I've got to say, I wasn't angry so much as I was just stunned. It was just so unexpected and raw that I didn't—and to me just kind of ridiculous—that I couldn't really generate anger.

Coates: And you didn't feel insulted or ... ?

Obama: Well ... look. There is no doubt that there have been occasions during my presidency when I've said, 'Y'all just would not do this with anybody else.' Now, obviously the whole birth-certificate thing is the most salient example. I mean, there've been 43 other presidents. I don't remember the issue of where somebody was born ever coming up before. And so there have been other instances like that. There was one time where I was making a statement out here. And in the middle of my statement, somebody just started yelling. It was a reporter—

Coates: It was a reporter from *The Daily Caller*. I remember this.

Obama: From *The Daily Caller*. And I was probably more mad on that one. Because—whereas Joe Wilson, you got a sense of just this weird impulsive action on his part—this felt orchestrated and showed a lack of respect for the office that I think was unprecedented in a Rose Garden statement. Part of what's been difficult, though, during my presidency, is untangling the degree to which some of these issues are because of race and some of these issues being reflective of just a coarsening of the political culture and a sharpening of the political divides. Because I do remember watching Bill Clinton get impeached and Hillary Clinton being accused of killing Vince Foster. And if you ask them, I'm sure they would say, 'No, actually, what you're experiencing is not because you're black, it's because you're a Democrat.' And right around the beginning of Bill Clinton's presidency and what corresponds with the rise of right-wing media, a lot of the old boundaries and rules of civility just broke down.

Now, one way to think about this is that issues of race and issues of political philosophy have always been entangled, and it's hard to draw them out. Right? So when I think about the Tea Party or conservatives who've opposed my agenda, I have no doubt that there are those who oppose my agenda because they have a coherent and

sincere view about the role of the federal government relative to the state governments; they believe that an overreaching federal power that is taxing, regulating, redistributing is contrary to the vision of freedom that the Founders intended—and they can believe those things independent of race.

Having said that, a rudimentary knowledge of American history tells you that the relationship between the federal government and the states was very much mixed up with attitudes towards slavery, attitudes towards Jim Crow, attitudes towards anti-poverty programs and who benefited and who didn't. And so I'm careful not to attribute any particular resistance or slight or opposition to race. But what I do believe is that if somebody didn't have a problem with their daddy being employed by the federal government, and didn't have a problem with the Tennessee Valley Authority electrifying certain communities, and didn't have a problem with the interstate highway system being built, and didn't have a problem with the GI Bill, and didn't have a problem with the [Federal Housing Administration] subsidizing the suburbanization of America, and that all helped you build wealth and create a middle class—and then suddenly as soon as African Americans or Latinos are interested in availing themselves of those same mechanisms as ladders into the middle class, you now have a violent opposition to them, then I think you at least have to ask yourself the question of how consistent you are and what's different, what's changed.

You know, I always talk about when I was doing civil-rights law and people would talk about the dearth of African Americans in police departments and fire departments around the country. And they would say, 'Well, this should be a meritocracy, and everybody needs to take a test, and that's objective, and anything else is affirmative action and unfair.' And I'm thinking, *Well, when Officer O'Malley or Officer Krupke was walking the beat, nobody said it was a meritocracy then.* What happened? We're suddenly now of the notion that somebody who's a police officer or firefighter having some affinity and familiarity with the community they are serving is completely out of bounds. What changed? So I think that one of the things I'm always trying to do is to just promote a consistent philosophy and ethic about how government can help everybody and try to show that what worked for the majority community in previous generations would be likely to work now, too. And the burden is on those who oppose investments in these things to explain what's changed.

Coates: I was caught because you said that you were the only person that Ben Nelson brought in to campaign for him. And maybe my memory is wrong, but I believe he was one of the harder folks to negotiate with in terms of getting the [Affordable Care Act]

passed. You can correct me if I'm wrong, but as I recall, I heard in 2008 from your campaign that there was room to work across party lines, there was room for people who disagree to come together. If we just put forth intelligent proposals, folks would be able to come together. When did you realize it wasn't quite going to go that way?

Obama: In the first two weeks. Mitch McConnell's statement about how our No. 1 goal was to make sure Obama was a one-term president. That hadn't surfaced publicly yet, but—

Coates: Did that surprise you when that got to you?

Obama: No, because by that time we had seen the behavior. But, and I've told this story before, the economy was in a free fall. And the one thing I anticipated was that we could get some bipartisan cooperation early on, at least to stop the bleeding, before normal politics kicked in. I mean, we were losing hundreds of thousands of jobs, folks were losing their homes everywhere, the financial system was locked up, the auto industry was melting down. And the risks of us going into 15 percent unemployment and a real catastrophic situation were reasonably high. And so speed was of the essence. And we put together this package, called the Recovery Act, which was basically a big stimulus package, and we designed it in such a way that we thought it would have some appeal to Republicans. Because we had infrastructure spending, and we had spending going directly to states to make sure they weren't laying off teachers and police and firefighters, and we had a big tax cut for ordinary families, as well as spending for clean energy and education and a whole host of other things.

And I still remember the day that I'm scheduled to meet with the House Republican caucus, and I get into the car and we're driving up, and I forget who it was, but one of my staff tells me that John Boehner has just announced that they are opposed to the Recovery Act. Before they had even seen it, before I had made a presentation, before I had had a conversation with them. This was going to be sort of the opening round of negotiations where I'm explaining to them the dire situation and asking for a bipartisan effort to help the American people. And they had shut it down. And that, I think, gave me an inkling of a different political environment than the one that we had seen in the past.

Now, again, I think it's really important to understand that had there been a white president—had Hillary Clinton been president, or Joe Biden been president—it is entirely possible that they would have pursued the same strategy. Because the way

politics had been structured at that point, where there was so much political gerrymandering, and the media has increasingly become so balkanized, there was an understandable political incentive for them not to cooperate.

You know, the genius of Mitch McConnell—and to some degree John Boehner—was a recognition that if we were about to go into a bad recession and the president had come in on this wave of good feeling, Democrats control the House, they control the Senate—if he's completely successful in yanking us out of this and cleaning up a mess a Republican president had left behind, that we might lock in Democratic majorities for a very long time. But on the other hand, if Republicans didn't cooperate, and there was not a portrait of bipartisan cooperation and a functional federal government, then the party in power would pay the price and that they could win back the Senate and/or the House. That wasn't an inaccurate political calculation. And they executed well, and we got clobbered in 2010. So the lesson I drew there was a political lesson. It was not a racial lesson.

Coates: I just want to push this a little bit more. What about the idea that it's not so much you as a black man as president, but the fact that we're at a point in history where the Democratic Party, especially locally—the states—has become very racialized?

Obama: Well, I think what is true is that when the southern Democrats all flipped, and over the course of successive elections, dating back to '68, you have a process whereby 90 percent African Americans are voting in the Democratic Party, and southern and many rural and western whites are increasingly voting Republican, and cultural issues become more prominent, that it helped to accelerate what has been called this great sorting. And when you combine that with political gerrymandering, when you combine that with the impact of the media, it makes it easier for Republicans not to cooperate, because there's nobody in their districts that will punish them for not cooperating with a Democratic president. There is no doubt that that's true.

Now, I leave it at this, and maybe we can pick it up in our next conversation: I think what was more of an early lesson around race was the Skip Gates incident. And the reason that was interesting to me was because I didn't think it was that big of a deal, and I didn't think my statement was particularly controversial. I don't know if you know Skip, but Skip is a little guy who uses a cane and has a limp and is late 60s. And if he's on his porch and he ends up being handcuffed, then my working assumption was, everybody would kind of think that was kind of an overreaction.

Now, Skip can be, you know, salty, so I have no doubt that—I wasn't there, but I would not be surprised if Skip used some inappropriate language with the officer when the officer came up to question him. And, you know, this wasn't some great civil-rights injustice. But it was interesting to see how what I thought was sort of an offhanded and fairly innocuous statement, which was, look, you know, this probably wasn't—I think I said this: The Cambridge police probably handled this a little stupidly. And the fact of the matter is that part of the reason this becomes news is because there's this underlying feeling on the part of a lot of African Americans that interaction with police is not always evenhanded.

To see the cultural reaction, and in retrospect to see how my poll numbers with white voters dropped really significantly off this one tempest in a teapot, that was instructive. Now, there are some who say that's when Obama started trimming his sails on racial issues. That's not accurate. That's not accurate. The truth is that I wanted to make sure that we did not have a bunch of distractions at a time where I'm just putting out fires everywhere. I mean, I've got two wars, I've got an economic crisis of a proportion we haven't seen since the Great Depression, and that was not the time, from my perspective, to just open up a big floodgate of conversation around race, which I did not think was going to be productive. What I did learn from that, though, were two things. One was—that was one lesson among many, in those first six months—about the magnification of my words. So if I look at the statement that I made at the time that I thought was pretty innocuous, using the word *stupid* would be a word I'd never use now, just because I'm president and everything gets magnified. So I could have made the same point in a way that would not have, I think, felt as visceral.

Coates: You think you could have got that across about it?

Obama: I think I could have got it across better. So that's point No. 1. Point No. 2, though, is: What it also showed me was the degree to which the filter that I discussed earlier can completely shape a narrative in a way that will just run until you get some sort of circuit breaker going. And part of what I had to start teaching my staff was: not to overreact to that. Because what is absolutely true is that, you know, my press office freaked out around that in a way that I was not that freaked out about. There was a part of me that was like, 'Okay, so the Cambridge police isn't happy with me, but this really isn't a big deal, we've got other stuff we've got to worry about.' They were channeling what they were seeing coming at them suddenly in the press room and through news reports.

And what that meant then was that, on issues of race, certainly on issues of race as it relates to law enforcement, what I wanted to make sure of is that when we said something that was precise, that we were choosing those moments where we had the best chance of driving home the point and extracting real progress. And that we needed to think about how the narrative would be shaped in a way that was constructive rather than us just being on the defense all the time. You know, so it's interesting for me to think about that moment and then all the subsequent issues that have come up.

Coates: Yeah, it got a lot worse than that, than being arrested on your porch.

Obama: Well, exactly. Right. But the dynamic around which everybody went to their respective corners on what was such a small incident, it foreshadowed the response that I would get later. And to this day, it does not matter how many times I will say, "You know what? Our police have a tough job and 99 percent of them are doing a great job," etc., and I will get letters afterwards: "Why are you always throwing cops under the bus? Why do you hate police?" [Laughing] And I literally made my press office sort of put together a packet of something like 30 statements that I've made, highlighted in yellow, that I will send to constituents—because oftentimes, you know, these are the wives of police officers who are scared for their husbands, and I don't want to ignore them. But it tells me what they're seeing. It tells me what they're hearing. The filter through which they are receiving information is powerful. And that was an early lesson about how powerful that filter was.



IAN ALLEN

“Better Is Good”: Obama on Reparations, Civil Rights, and the Art of the Possible

The second in a series of interviews between Ta-Nehisi Coates and the president

In “[My President Was Black](#),” Ta-Nehisi Coates examined Barack Obama’s tenure in office and his legacy. The story was built, in part, around a series of conversations he had with the president. This is a transcript of the second of those four encounters, which took place on October 19, 2016. Valerie Jarrett, the senior adviser to the president, was also present.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I’ve talked to Marty [Nesbitt], I talked to Mama Kaye [Wilson], I talked to Eric Holder, so I’ve been making the rounds. I’ve got all the goods.

Barack Obama: You’ve got all the goods.

Coates: I've got all the goods. Talked to [David] Axelrod, talked to [David] Plouffe.

Obama: I'm ready to just fill in the gaps.

Coates: I thought we'd talk about policy today. I wanted to start by getting a sense of your mind-set coming into the job, and as I've understood you—and you can reject this—your perspective is that a mixture of universalist policies, in combination with an increased level of personal responsibility and communal responsibility among African Americans, when we talk about these gaps that we see between black and white America, that that really is the way forward. Is that a correct summation?

Obama: I think it's a three-legged stool and you left out one, which is vigorous enforcement of antidiscrimination laws. So the way we thought about it when we came in is that—and obviously we came in during crisis, so how we might have structured our policy sequencing if, when we came in, the economy was okay, and we weren't potentially going into a great recession, and folks weren't all losing their homes, might have been different. But as a general matter, my view would be that if you want to get at African American poverty, the income gap, wealth gap, achievement gap, that the most important thing is to make sure that the society as a whole does right by people who are poor, are working class, are aspiring to a better life for their kids. Higher minimum wages, full-employment programs, early-childhood education: Those kinds of programs are, by design, universal, but by definition, because they are helping folks who are in the worst economic situations, are most likely to disproportionately impact and benefit African Americans. They also have the benefit of being sellable to a majority of the body politic.

Step No. 2, and this is where I think policies do need to be somewhat race-specific, is making sure that institutions are not discriminatory. So you've got something like the FHA [Federal Housing Administration], which was on its face a universal program that involved a huge mechanism for wealth accumulation and people entering into the middle class. But if, in its application, black folks were excluded from it, then you have to override that by going after those discriminatory practices. The same would be true for something like Social Security, where historically, if you just read the law and the fact that it excluded domestic workers or agricultural workers, you might not see race in it, unless you knew that that covered a huge chunk of African Americans, particularly in the South. So reinvigorating the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, making sure that in our Department of Education, where we see evidence of black boys being suspended at substantially higher rates than white boys for

the same behavior, in the absence of that kind of rigorous enforcement of the nondiscrimination principle, then the long-standing biases that I believe have weakened, but are still clearly present in our society, assert themselves in ways that usually disadvantage African Americans.

If you've got those two things right—if those two things are happening—then a third leg of the stool is, how do we in the African American community build a culture in which we are saying to our kids, “Here's what it takes to succeed. Here's the sacrifices you need to make to be able to get ahead. Here's how we support each other. Here's how we look out for each other.” And it is my view that if society was doing the right thing with respect to you, [and there were] programs targeted at helping people rise into the middle class and have a good income and be able to save and send their kids to school, and you've got a vigorous enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, then I have confidence in the black community's capabilities to then move forward.

Now, does that mean that all vestiges of past discrimination would be eliminated, that the income gap or the wealth gap or the education gap would be erased in five years or 10 years? Probably not, and so this is obviously a discussion we've had before when you talk about something like reparations. Theoretically, you can make, obviously, a powerful argument that centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, discrimination are the primary cause for all those gaps. That those were wrongs done to the black community as a whole, and black families specifically, and that in order to close that gap, a society has a moral obligation to make a large, aggressive investment, even if it's not in the form of individual reparations checks, but in the form of a Marshall Plan, in order to close those gaps. It is easy to make that theoretical argument. But as a practical matter, it is hard to think of any society in human history in which a majority population has said that as a consequence of historic wrongs, we are now going to take a big chunk of the nation's resources over a long period of time to make that right. You can look at examples like postwar Germany, where reparations were paid to Holocaust victims and families, but—

Coates: They lost the war.

Obama: They lost the war. Small population, finite amount of money that it was going to cost. Not multiple generations but people, in some cases, who are still alive, who can point to, “That was my house. Those were my paintings. Those were my mother's family jewels.” If you look at countries like South Africa, where you had a

black majority, there have been efforts to tax and help that black majority, but it hasn't come in the form of a formal reparations program. You have countries like India that have tried to help untouchables, with essentially affirmative-action programs, but it hasn't fundamentally changed the structure of their societies.

So the bottom line is that it's hard to find a model in which you can practically administer and sustain political support for those kinds of efforts. And what makes America complicated as well is the degree to which this is not just a black/white society, and it is becoming less so every year. So how do Latinos feel if there's a big investment just in the African American community, and they're looking around and saying, "We're poor as well. What kind of help are we getting?" Or Asian Americans who say, "Look, I'm a first-generation immigrant, and clearly I didn't have anything to do with what was taking place." And now you start getting into trying to calibrate—

Coates: Isn't there just—not to cut you off—isn't there, and this is out of the role of U.S. president, I'm almost speaking to you as a law professor now, an intellectual, in fact—

Obama: Well, that's how I was answering the question, because if you want me to talk about politics, I'll be much more blunt about it.

Coates: I figured that. I thought that was what I was getting.

Obama: I was giving the benefit of playing out, theoretically, how you could think about that.

Coates: And I appreciate that. And the question I would ask is in that situation, to the immigrant who comes here, first generation, and says, "I didn't do any of this," but the country is largely here because of that. In other words, many of the benefits that you will actually enjoy are, in fact, in part—I won't say largely—in part here because of the past. So when you want the benefits, when you invoke the past, that thus you inherit the debt, too—

Obama: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I guess, here's the way—probably the best way of saying it is that you can make a theoretical, abstract argument in favor of something like reparations. And maybe I'm just not being sufficiently optimistic or imaginative enough—

Coates: You're supposed to be optimistic!

Obama: Well, I thought I was, but I'm not so optimistic as to think that you would ever be able to garner a majority of an American Congress that would make those kinds of investments above and beyond the kinds of investments that could be made in a progressive program for lifting up all people. So to restate it: I have much more confidence in my ability, or any president or any leader's ability, to mobilize the American people around a multiyear, multibillion-dollar investment to help every child in poverty in this country than I am in being able to mobilize the country around providing a benefit specific to African Americans as a consequence of slavery and Jim Crow. Now, we can debate the justness of that. But I feel pretty confident in that assessment politically. And, you know, I think that part of my optimism comes from the belief that we as a people could actually, regardless of all the disadvantage of the past, regardless of the fact that a lot of other folks got a head start in the race, if we were able to make the race fair right now, and—

Coates: You think we could catch up?

Obama: We were able to make sure that it stayed fair for a long time and that children going forward were not encumbered by some of that same bias of the past, I think it would not take long at all, because we are a talented, resourceful people. Just play this out as a thought experiment: Imagine if you had genuine, high-quality early-childhood education for every child, and suddenly every black child in America—but also every poor white child or Latino [child], but just stick with every black child in America—is getting a really good education. And they're graduating from high school at the same rates that whites are, and they are going to college at the same rates that whites are, and they are able to afford college at the same rates because the government has universal programs that say that you're not going to be barred from school just because of how much money your parents have. So now they're all graduating. And let's also say that the Justice Department and the courts are making sure, as I've said in a speech before, that when Jamal sends his résumé in, he's getting treated the same as when Johnny sends his résumé in.

Now, are we going to have suddenly the same number of CEOs, billionaires, etc., as the white community? In 10 years? Probably not, maybe not even in 20 years. But I guarantee you that we would be thriving, we would be succeeding. We wouldn't have huge numbers of young African American men in jail. We'd have more family formation as college-graduated girls are meeting boys who are their peers, which then in turn means the next generation of kids are growing up that much better. And suddenly you've got a whole generation that's in a position to start using the

incredible creativity that we see in music, and sports, and frankly even on the streets, channeled into starting all kinds of businesses. I feel pretty good about our odds in that situation.

And my point has always been: We're so far from that. Why are we even having the abstract conversation when we've got a big fight on our hands just to get strong, universal antipoverty programs and social programs in place, and we're still fighting to make sure that basic antidiscrimination laws are enforced, not just at the federal level, by the way, but throughout government and throughout the private sector? And those are fights that we can win because—and this is where I do believe America has changed—the majority, not by any means 100 percent, but the majority of Americans believe in the idea of nondiscrimination. They believe in the idea that Jamal and Johnny should be treated equally. They believe in the idea that a child shouldn't be consigned to poverty just because of circumstances of their birth. Now, in practice, in daily social interactions, etc., there may be all kinds of biases and prejudices that are unspoken, that people aren't aware of, that affect who's hired, and who gets loans, and how kids are treated in school. But it's a powerful thing if you have on your side an idea that the overwhelming majority of people believe in because that's how you can build a consensus that's lasting. And that's how you avoid an argument that "I'm being treated unfairly because you are treating somebody differently than me." Everybody potentially can make the claim that we should all be treated fairly. As opposed to getting into arguments about, well, these folks have been treated fairly so now we're going to be doing things that, very easily in the minds of a lot Americans feel like, "Now I'm being treated unfairly."

Coates: One of the things I would say—the first thing I want to say is—I don't want to draw this into an either-or argument, that if you make the reparations argument, you therefore don't support everything else that you said.

Obama: I'm well aware of that.

Coates: Okay. The second part, you're talking about how the country has changed, and the consciousness, and I think we both agree that 150 years ago that wasn't true. And I wonder, is it the work, perhaps maybe not of presidents but certainly of people outside of government, to change that mind-set? And if one can come to see, for instance, that, yeah, it is true that nondiscrimination should be a basic value that we share, that, as I would put it, responsibility for our history is one, too?

Obama: Right. And I think that it is. I want my children—I want Malia and Sasha—to understand that they’ve got responsibilities beyond just what they themselves have done. That they have a responsibility to the larger community and the larger nation, that they should be sensitive to and extra thoughtful about the plight of people who have been oppressed in the past, are oppressed currently. So that’s a wisdom that I want to transmit to my kids. And it may be that we found an area where you’re more optimistic than me. But I would say that’s a high level of enlightenment that you’re looking to have from a majority of the society. And it may be something that future generations are more open to, but I am pretty confident that for the foreseeable future, using the argument of nondiscrimination, and “Let’s get it right for the kids who are here right now,” and giving them the best chance possible, is going to be a more persuasive argument.

One of the things you learn as president is, as powerful as this office is, you have limited bandwidth. And the time goes by really quickly and you’re constantly making choices, and there are pressures on you from all different directions—pressures on your attention, not just pressures from different constituencies. And so you have to be pretty focused about where can you have the biggest, quickest impact. And I always tell my staff, “Better is good.” I’ll take better every time, because better is hard. Better may not be as good as the best, but better is surprisingly hard to obtain. And better is actually harder than worse. [Laughter]

It requires enormous energy for us to cut the African American uninsured rate by a third. A lot of scars. Bernie Sanders would say, “You still have millions of African Americans who aren’t insured, and if we had a single-payer system, that wouldn’t be the case.” And that’s true. But it is my judgment that had I spent the first two years trying to get a single-payer system, all those folks who now have health insurance that didn’t have it would still be uninsured. And those are millions of people whose lives are impacted right now. I get letters from them right now. “You saved my child’s life.” “I did not have to sell my home when my wife got sick.” And that is what, as a policy maker, I’m trying to achieve during the short period of time that I’m here.

Now, you as a thinker, you as a writer, you as a philosopher, you want to stretch the boundaries of thinking, because you’re not constrained by trying to move the levers of power right now. And so I think that these are all worthy topics of conversation. Sometimes I wonder how much of these debates have to do with the desire, the legitimate desire, for that history to be recognized. Because there is a psychic power to the recognition that is not satisfied with a universal program, it’s not satisfied by the Af-

fordable Care Act, or an expansion of Pell grants, or an expansion of the earned-income tax credit. It doesn't speak to the hurt, and the sense of injustice, and the self-doubt that arises out of the fact that we're behind now, and it makes us sometimes feel as if there must be something wrong with us, unless you're able to see the history and say, "It's amazing we got this far given what we went through." So part of, I think, the argument sometimes that I've had with folks who are much more interested in sort of race-specific programs is less an argument about what is practically achievable and sometimes maybe more an argument of "We want society to see what's happened, and internalize it, and answer it in demonstrable ways." And those impulses I very much understand, but my hope would be that, as we're moving through the world right now, we're able to get that psychological or emotional peace by seeing very concretely our kids doing better and being more hopeful and having greater opportunities. And your son thriving at some United Nations model conference, and me seeing Malia and Sasha doing amazing things. And some of the mentees that I was talking to at A and T overcome incredible disadvantages and starting to gain confidence in what they can do in the world. And I'll stop there.

Coates: You know, Mr. President, I think largely what a lot of us fear, everything you described—Pell grants, health care, all the programs—that's the world—let me speak for myself, not for anybody—that's a world I'd want to live in whether black or not. That just speaks to society's commitment to its citizens. What we fear is that the gap will never close. Or let me rephrase that: The gap will close, but it will never actually be equal. There will always be carrying this. That without some sort of specific acknowledgment—you know, when I was working on this piece about race, the theory—fine. Going to a 90-year-old's house in Lawndale in Chicago, and I'm not supposing you don't have more experience with this, because you read letters and travel and you see, but as a journalist to sit there and see somebody who fought in World War II, and to hear him talk about how they had done everything right—basically obeyed their side of the social contract—and to hear them basically say, "And what I got was ripped off." And then to have in my city in Baltimore, right now about 10 years ago during the housing crisis, to see Wells Fargo going to these black folks who just want to buy homes, who just want to be part of the basic American dream, social contract, and to see them being ripped off, not in the same fashion but the same idea—taking from them. We fear without any sort of direct engagement of that question, it won't stop.

Obama: Well, this is why the antidiscrimination principle being enforced is important. Because it won't stop if some of the underlying biases aren't challenged and surfaced. And that in and of itself creates backlash and denial. This is what I mean

when I say better is hard. Just making sure that right now folks aren't being ripped off—that's a challenge. I remember when I was in Chicago and data started coming out that when black folks walk into an auto dealership, and women, too, to some degree, they are automatically given higher quotes, worse deals. And this was just documented extensively across auto dealerships around the country. There was a tax being imposed on black folks. By collecting that data, you can construct policies to combat that. And that's potentially thousands of dollars in people's pockets that are being taken away right now. But it's hard to do. It requires an effective government agency, and data collection, and pushing, and shoving, and litigation until finally you start getting new norms and new practices.

“THERE IS A CERTAIN PERCENTAGE OF THE WHITE POPULATION ... IF THEY STARTED HAVING MORE MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK KIDS WHO ARE FRIENDS WITH THEIR KIDS, EATING CHEERIOS IN THEIR KITCHEN, THEIR ATTITUDES START CHANGING.”



And my argument—it's not even an argument—my conviction is that those fights need to be fought right now and can be won. And if in fact we have finite political capital, energy, resources, we need to win those fights. And if we win all those fights, and now let's say the income gap, and the wealth gap, and the education gap have for the most part been closed—let's say hypothetically, knowing what we know now about public policy, that we could close the education gap so that it was only a couple percentage points, and we could make sure that hiring barriers and educational barriers had been leveled down, and unemployment among African Americans right now instead of being double was only 10 percent higher than white unemployment—if we got to that point, first of all, America as a whole would be a lot richer. Second of all, the African American community would not just be wealthier, but it would actually

also be more politically empowered by virtue of having more resources. Third, I actually believe that some residue of discrimination would lessen, because it's my view that there is a certain percentage of the white population that stereotypes and makes assumptions about African Americans because they don't inject the history of slavery and Jim Crow into current incarceration rates, or crime rates, or poverty rates, or what have you—but if they started having more middle-class black kids who are friends with their kids, eating Cheerios in their kitchen, their attitudes start changing. If we achieve all that and there's still a gap, at worst we're much better positioned to pursue strategies to close that final gap. And at best we might surprise ourselves in terms of how well we're doing.

So there's going to—as I said before, it's a generational project just to get America to live up fully to its ideals and to have the kind of society where everybody has a shot, and every kid is getting a good education, and people are getting living wages, and they have decent retirement. And if we got there and we looked up and we said, “You know what? Black folks are still doing a little bit worse off than whites, but it's not like it was 20 years ago,” then we can have a discussion about how do we get that last little bit. But that's a high-class problem to have. And to me the question right now is: How do I close that first three-quarters of the achievement gap, education gap, wealth gap? What gives me the best chance to do that? And I'm pretty darn sure that if America is a just society and treating people well right now, irrespective of past wrongs, that I'm going to close a big chunk of that gap. I've seen it.

This is what I always take away from something like *My Brother's Keeper*—it's almost an analogy. I look at some of the kids that I interact with, and they were born with so many disadvantages. And you could start off in your first interaction with them saying, “Unless they get a lot of compensatory help, they're not going to be able to compete; they're just so far behind, and they're wounded and they're hurt.” Think about that young man we were talking to: His mother was a drug addict, and his dad is in prison, and he has no sense of direction. And there's no doubt that the more you did for him, probably the better he would do, but what's always striking to me is he just got a little bit. He just had a few adults paying attention and telling him he was worth something while he's in juvie, he's just got somebody who is willing to pay his community-college fees, and suddenly you've got this young man sitting there who is so self-aware that to the president of the United States he can say, “Look even though I look like I've got my act together, I've still got pains, wounds, there're issues I still have, and yet I'm going to be a teacher and I can tell my story, and here's how I'm thinking about social change in the community.” And I'm thinking to myself, *Wow*. I

believe he can close that gap, and my conclusion is that five years from now, if you ask me who has a better shot of being a great teacher in a school, that guy or some kid who grew up in an upper-middle-class community who out of all kinds of good-hearted impulses wants to be a teacher, I'm betting he ends up being the better teacher. That gap has been closed, even though you would think it wouldn't be.

Now, I don't want to exaggerate; having as many African American men as we've had in the criminal-justice system, and the amount of time it takes for the damage done by that to wash through our society and our communities, the disadvantages born out of kids being undiagnosed with mental-health problems early, or not getting the kind of exposure to reading and math when they're 4 or 5 or 6 years old, that carries a cost.

“I’M TRYING TO MOVE AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER HERE, I’M NOT JUST STEERING THE SPEEDBOAT.”

But I know that those gaps can be closed. And they can be closed substantially, more than I think we believe. So I guess maybe we can agree that in some ways you're more optimistic than me, and in some ways I'm more optimistic than you. You're maybe more optimistic than me in terms of the ability to persuade a society to make up for past injustices; but maybe I'm more optimistic than you about the ability to persuade a society to make up for current injustices and the capacity of the victims of those injustices to catch up pretty quickly.

Coates: Were you surprised relatively early on in your presidency when people criticized you for not having a quote-unquote “black agenda”?

Obama: No. I mean, I think if you worked at the community level in Chicago and then a politician on the South Side of Chicago, and worked at the state level, then you're pretty familiar with all the variations of politics in the African American community and criticisms you may get. If you're not familiar with those or you don't have a thick enough skin to take it, then you probably wouldn't have gotten here.

Coates: So it didn't surprise you at all?

Obama: No. I think, and look, Ta-Nehisi, I don't want to discount those criticisms, but offsetting those criticisms is that I have 90 percent or 95 percent support in the African American community and it's not sort of "Well, he's black, so it's okay. We're not going to say anything even though we're seething." And I hang out with a lot of middle-aged black women, and they're not casual in their support of me. There's a lot of love forthcoming. Partly because they understand the constraints of this society. They know that this is hard. And they also, I think, see me and Michelle trying. It's one thing if they were watching and we were not working on poverty issues, and we weren't working on education issues, and we weren't working on health-care issues. You know, they're pretty sophisticated; they understand that I'm trying to move an aircraft carrier here, I'm not just steering the speedboat. And so part of it is, I think, intellectual, and part of it is obviously emotional as well. But that support has been so constant and gracious and loving. Michelle and I have never felt as if, at any stage, folks didn't have our backs. And as a consequence, I think that just spurred us on that much more to make us want to do the right thing, and do our best in the positions that we have.

Coates: So perhaps more substantive than that early-on critique, for instance—and Valerie [Jarrett] and I talked a little bit about this—when you attempted to bring in some of the Black Lives Matter activists and folks refused. And I heard you address this at Howard, too. What I would say—did you understand why some of them refused? Could you comprehend it?

Obama: Oh, I absolutely could comprehend it. A couple of them refused because they're 20, or 21. I mean, that's why they refused. It's the same as when we were working on immigration reform and there was a young Latino man, young immigration activist here who, in the Roosevelt Room, refused to shake my hand.

Coates: Are you serious?

Obama: Absolutely. And I'm going around the table shaking everybody's hand. And he made a point of saying, "I can't shake your hand; you're deporting too many people." And I just said to him, "Young man, I'm glad that you feel so passionately about this issue, but you're with the president right now in the White House. You've got to think about what's going to be most effective in getting what you need, what you're trying to accomplish. Because this may not be your best strategy."

Coates: How did he respond?

Obama: Like a 21-year-old would, which is sort of a mixture of defiance and uncertainty and embarrassment. Which is fine. Look, so I guess I don't—one of the things you understand, and it's hard to do, but you—and I'm not saying I'm impervious to criticism—but one of the things that you come pretty early on to understand in this job, and you start figuring out even during the course of the campaign, is that there's Barack Obama the person and there's Barack Obama the symbol, or the office holder, or what people are seeing on television, or just a representative of power. And so when people criticize or respond negatively to me, usually they're responding to this character that they're seeing on TV called Barack Obama, or to the office of the presidency and the White House and what that represents. And so you don't take it personally. You understand that if people are angry that somehow the government is failing, then they are going to look to the guy who represents government. And that applies, by the way, even to some of the folks who are now Trump supporters. They're responding to a fictional character named Barack Obama who they see on Fox News or who they hear about through Rush Limbaugh.

Coates: What I'm trying to get at is a theory—you're very unique in the sense that you are the president but you've also been an activist. You've actually occupied both roles. So what I'm getting at is, can you see how—

“IT'S USEFUL FOR ACTIVISTS JUST TO BE OUT THERE TO KEEP YOU MINDFUL AND NOT GET COMPLACENT, EVEN IF ULTIMATELY YOU THINK SOME OF THEIR CRITICISM IS MISGUIDED.”

Obama: Is there utility—

Coates: In not being so close to power?

Obama: Yeah. And my argument would be: Yes, and it's the reason why I am always interested in engaging in people who are pushing us and pushing against the status

quo. But having been an activist, the only thing that I'm always encouraging activists to do is, once you have raised the issue, and even through controversial means, you have to come behind it with an agenda and the possibility of reconciliation if power meets your demands. And that was true during the civil-rights movement, that was true during the union movement, that's always been true. And so the only time I get frustrated with activist criticism is if I have recognized them, and invited them to work with me to figure out how we solve this problem that they're concerned about, and either they don't engage out of the sense of purity—"I'm not going to shake his hand"—or you're not sufficiently prepared so you don't even know what to ask for, or you're not being strategic as an activist and trying to figure out how the process has to work in order for you to get what you want.

So I'll give you some specific examples just so that this isn't too abstract: I thought Brittany Packnett, who was one of the Ferguson activists, really interesting, smart young lady, really impressive—you might want to talk with her. So she was one of the organizers of the Ferguson movement, ended up joining our task force. She came in here and she just knew her stuff. And I don't think at any point backed off, even in our first meeting, saying, "Here's what we're concerned about; here's where we're disappointed in the Justice Department's response; here's what we need." But she was sufficiently well-informed and engaged that it was very easy then to say, "You are right about this, you're wrong I think about that, but I'm not sure, let's sit down and see if we can hammer out a strategy that we agree with. And by the way, I want you talking to that police chief over there and that sheriff, because I think you might be able to persuade them if we break this down into its component parts."

Now, in contrast, there have been times where, let's say on LGBT issues, when we were trying to end Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and I got the Pentagon and Bob Gates, a Republican holdover from the Bush administration, to authorize a study of how you might end Don't Ask, Don't Tell, headed up by Jeh Johnson, who at that time was a council to the Justice Department. And it was going to take a year to conduct that study, issue a report, and figure out how it might be implemented, what effect it would have on unit cohesion and military effectiveness. And I had laid out this strategy because if I could get the Pentagon's imprimatur on this thing, then I knew that we could end up getting legislation passed to reverse the policy, and we could get the branches of all the military to implement it. But during the course of that year, probably every speech I gave, I'd have gay activists just screaming at me during rallies. And you just say, "Come on, man. Not only do I agree with you, but I've actually got a strategy to execute, we are executing it, and in what sense do you think that you yelling at me here is going to advance your cause?"

Coates: They don't want you to forget.

Obama: Well, the theory was they didn't want us to forget. But the problem was, and we saw some of this in the immigration-reform issues as well, was they hadn't done sufficient homework to know that I didn't have all the capacity they thought I did in order to just execute this through the stroke of a pen. So I think that where I've gotten frustrated during the course of my presidency has never been because I was getting pushed too hard by activists to see the justness of a cause or the essence of an issue; I think where I get frustrated at times was the belief that the president can do anything if he just decides he wants to do it. And that sort of lack of awareness on the part of an activist about the constraints of our political system and the constraints on this office, I think, sometimes would leave me to mutter under my breath. Very rarely did I lose it publicly. Yeah, usually I'd just smile. [Laughter] No, and the reason I say that is because those are the times where sometimes you feel actually a little bit hurt. Because you feel like saying to these folks, "[Don't] you think if I could do it, I [would] have just done it. Do you think that the only problem is that I don't care enough about the plight of poor people, or gay people, or immigrants, or ...?"

Coates: But don't they have some level of distrust towards you? I mean, that's what I'm hearing: They don't trust you to ultimately follow through. And isn't that kind of the mind-set that the activist has to have?

Obama: Well, I think, yes. Which is why I don't get too hurt. I mean, I think there is a benefit to wanting to hold power's feet to the fire until you actually see the goods. I get that. And I think it is important. And frankly, sometimes it's useful for activists just to be out there to keep you mindful and not get complacent, even if ultimately you think some of their criticism is misguided.

I'll give you an example that's outside the issues of social justice, but the criticism that some on the left consistently have given us around drone strikes. The truth is that this technology really began to take off right at the beginning of my presidency. And it wasn't until about a year, year and a half in where I began to realize that the Pentagon and our national-security apparatus and the CIA were all getting too comfortable with the technology as a tool to fight terrorism, and not being mindful enough about how that technology is being used and the dangers of a form of warfare that is so detached from what is actually happening on the ground. And so we initiated this big process to try to get it in a box, and checks and balances, and much higher standards about when they're used. But the truth is that, in trying to get at terror-

ists who are in countries that either are unwilling or unable to capture those terrorists or disable them themselves, there are a lot of situations where the use of a drone is going to result in much fewer civilian casualties and much less collateral damage than if I send in a battalion of marines. And I think right now we probably have the balance about right.

Now, you wouldn't know that if you talked to Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International or some of the international activist organizations. Certainly you wouldn't know that if you were talking to some of the writers who criticize our drone policy. But I've actually told my staff it's probably good that they stay critical of this policy, even though I think right now we're doing the best that we can in a dangerous world with terrorists who would gladly blow up a school bus full of American kids if they could. We probably have got it about right. But if suddenly all those organizations said, "Okay, the Obama administration's got it right, and we don't have a problem here," the instinct towards starting to use it more, and then some of those checks and balances that we've built up starting to decay—that's probably what would happen. So there's an example of where I think, even if the criticism is not always perfectly informed and in some cases I would deem unfair, just the noise, attention, fuss probably keeps powerful officials or agencies on their toes. And they should be on their toes when it comes to the use of deadly force.

Coates: This actually ties right back in. I wanted to ask you about it, so I'm glad you brought that up. You know, you're a great—and I don't want this to come of as a "gotcha" question, I want to have a discussion here about this to the extent that we have time, a discussion about this—

Obama: Oh we better, I mean, we have time, we've spent a lot of time—

Valerie Jarrett (senior adviser to Obama): We have around 15.

Coates: You know you've talked quite a bit about your admiration for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which is sincere and heartfelt. Have you thought much about how you reconcile that, not just with you yourself, but actually with the office of being president, which does involve killing—it's part of it as commander in chief—do you think much about reconciling those two things?

Obama: Yeah. Absolutely. When you take on the position of president, you are committing yourself to, first and foremost, protecting the American people. You are ac-

cepting an institutional role that requires you to make hard decisions and hard choices, and as a consequence you have to take your moral sense and not put it aside, but rather take that moral sense and apply it to the particulars of a job that is going to test those ethical and moral precepts differently than if you're a professor, or a business person, or a dad. And if I were not comfortable with the judicious use of our military to protect the American people, then I shouldn't have run for president. And having said that, I do think that the wisdom of a King or a Gandhi can inform my decisions. I may not be able to follow their beliefs to their logical conclusions, but I can think about what Gandhi said or King said about violence begetting violence, and still be true to my job by asking myself the question whenever we're confronted with a situation where some may be arguing for military action: Will this actually result in America being safer, or the most lives being saved?

But these kinds of questions arise not just in the military sphere. Going back to the discussion we were having about immigration reform, some of the most challenging discussions I've had are with activists who essentially would argue that any immigrant from Central America, let's say, who gets here to this country should be allowed to stay because their country is dangerous, their country is poor, and the opportunities for that mom and that kid are much greater here, and why would you send them back? And I remember—I think you were sitting in this discussion, Valerie—when I said to one young activist who herself was the daughter of an undocumented worker, and so could speak from a very personal and legitimate perspective—I remember saying to her: I agree with you, from a moral perspective, that a child from Honduras is worth the same as my daughter. God is not a respecter of boundaries; he's not saying that American kids deserve a better life than Honduran kids. But I'm the president of the United States, and the nation-state by definition means that boundaries mean something and borders mean something. And I have to be able to implement a policy that doesn't completely erase borders and boundaries. Not because I think that Honduran child who's gotten here is less worthy of love, attention, opportunity than my child, but because I'm the president of the United States of America and I'm not speaking as a religious leader. I've got certain responsibilities that I have to carry out in a very specific institution and in a specific moment in time.

So why don't you ask one last question? And then we can decide how much more you've got.

Coates: Okay. I wonder if part of this is the fact, as we talked about last time, that the idea of a black president was so remote to everybody that if it happened, it must

mean that all these other things would be true about the world—the world would change. I don't want to use the word *postracial* or anything like that. But the expectation of the idea of a black president was almost abstract to people.

Obama: Right.

Coates: And I wonder—I heard you talk about this very early in your presidency, but there was so much fervor, the crowds that you were getting—at what point did it occur to you: *Oh, I've got to tamp this down a little bit. People are going to expect me to split the seas?*

Obama: Well, we used to talk about this in the middle of the campaign. It's interesting when you go back. I told this to Valerie: We had to get out of Chicago so quick. Election night happens, suddenly I'm talking to Ben Bernanke and Hank Paulson and trying to figure out whether the world's going to fly apart, and Michelle is trying to figure out where the girls are going to go to school. And we pack up and leave and basically our house in Chicago just became like a time capsule. My desk in my home office still had stacks of articles and bills and stuff from 2008. And probably last year I went back, maybe it was earlier this year, and I just start going through some stuff and there was an article—it was the [*Time* magazine "Person of the Year" issue], and this was at the height of Obama Hype, I mean I'd just been elected—

Coates: Were you tired of it? Were you like, "Please stop"?

Obama: Oh yeah. But I read the—there's an interview of me in there—and I read through it, and what's interesting was, I was pretty realistic to people about what we could get done, and the situation we were in, and trying to tamp down expectations. If you listen to my stump speeches, if you listen to what I said at Grant Park, I kept on saying, "Look, this is not just about me, this is not going to happen in one year, or one term, or even one presidency." And we tried to layer into everything we were saying a sense of hope, but also realism. I don't regret the excitement, because I do think that it helped us accomplish as much as we did. I don't regret the fervor, because I do believe, in the African American community but also for other communities, and I know from talking to people, for communities around the world, the election of an African American to the most powerful office on Earth meant things had changed, and not just in superficial ways. That in some irreversible way the world was different.

But I can say with confidence that I never bought into the hype, and I made sure that the people around me didn't buy into the hype, and I did not surround myself with people who fed me the hype. And I'm glad of that as well. Because I think we would have made a lot more mistakes and would have accomplished a lot less had we not been grounded in some basic truths.

And I would say this, I'll go back to those black ladies I was talking about who love them some Barack and love Michelle even more—and by the way, they are not middle-aged anymore, because I'm now middle-aged. So they're a little bit older. As fervent as they were, as excited and happy as they were when I was elected, they had to go to work the next morning. They still had trouble paying those bills. They might have still had a son who was in trouble with the law or couldn't get a job because of a felony record. They didn't stop being grounded. And in many ways they're my touchstone, because they are what I meant when I talked about the audacity of hope. If you read that passage, it talks about not blind optimism, but it's hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty—that's what makes it audacious. Those are the ladies sitting in church. And in the same way that they might feel a joy and release on Sunday, they are still going to work on Monday. And that's who I was listening to during this process. And if at the end of my presidency they feel like I did a pretty good job, then I'll feel pretty good.

Coates: Okay.

Obama: All right.



IAN ALLEN

“It’s What We Do More Than What We Say”: Obama on Race, Identity, and the Way Forward

The third in a series of conversations between the president and Ta-Nehisi Coates

In “[My President Was Black](#),” Ta-Nehisi Coates examined Barack Obama’s tenure in office, and his legacy. The story was built, in part, around a series of conversations he had with the president. This is a transcript of the third of those four encounters, which took place on October 28, 2016, aboard Air Force One.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I'm going to put out a perception I've always had of you, and if I'm wrong you can riff off it. You being born in Hawaii, and the ancestry that you've had, and beyond that you having a cosmopolitan experience very early on living elsewhere—this is a blunt way to say it, but it occurs to me you had an opportunity to just check out. I never perceived myself as having much choice about being black, and I've always wondered why you've made the choice. And I don't know if you perceived it as a choice—maybe you felt the same way, like you didn't have one. But it seemed like you could have been anybody. You could have been one of these rootless cosmopolitans working on some other issues.

Barack Obama: Right.

Coates: I wonder how you came to think of yourself as black and why.

Obama: Well, part of my understanding of race is that it's more of a social construct than a biological reality. And in that sense, if you are perceived as African American, then you're African American. Now, you can—that can mean a whole lot of things. And one of the things I cured myself of fairly early on, and I think the African American community has moved away from, is this notion that there's one way to be black. And so you are right that I could have been an African American who worked for an international organization and was not engaged in the day-to-day struggles, politically or culturally, that the African American community faces. There are a lot of African Americans who may make those decisions, and they're still African American, but they're just living their lives in a different way.

I think for me, first and foremost, I always felt as if being black was cool. That it was not something to run away from, but something to embrace. Why that is, I think, is complicated. Part of it is, I think, that my mother thought black folks were cool, and if your mother loves you and is praising you—and says you look good, are smart—as you are, then you don't kind of think in terms of *How can I avoid this?* You feel pretty good about it. By the time I was cognizant of race, American culture had gone through enough changes that as a child, I wasn't just receiving constant negative messages about being black. It is true that I did not have the role models that Malia and Sasha have, but I could look at a Dr. J, or a Marvin Gaye, or a Thurgood Marshall and feel as if the embrace of African American culture was not going to hold me back but rather propel me forward, that it was exciting to be part of a group that had struggles but also had a huge potential.

I think it was not until I was in high school that I started seeing complications around it, and I started to think about it explicitly. I wrote about this in my first book, but even when I started perceiving discrimination, or racism, or just the disadvantages of being a minority, that felt more like a challenge than something to fear. I think probably the final element of this is, when I moved to the mainland, that was the first time where I confronted what at that time, and to some degree to this day, was the segregation of communities. And I did have to make, I think, a conscious choice to root myself physically and professionally in the African American community. And, again, this is something I've written about. I never wanted to be somebody who looked like I was avoiding who I saw in the mirror. I never thought that it would be a healthy thing. And disconnected from race, and more connected to the nature of me growing up, I didn't like the idea of being rootless.

Coates: You didn't like the idea of being rootless.

Obama: Michelle and I always joke—but it's not really a joke, I think it's an insight—that, in some ways, we saw in each other elements that we hadn't had growing up. In Michelle I saw roots. I saw a nuclear family, neighborhood, community, continuity. In me she saw adventure, cosmopolitanism. And so the fact that I had not grown up with a stable family, that I hadn't grown up with a father in the house or a community of which I was a part on a continuing basis—I had great friends, I had loving family members, but I didn't have a place—that, I think, warned me off of the kind of life you described of just floating around and enjoying life but never being fully invested in it. That element, I think, is not simply a racial decision. You can imagine me as an Irishman deciding to want to live in a neighborhood with some Irish folks and embracing that side of myself.

Coates: That's interesting. As somebody who began to travel relatively later, I had this moment when I was at this town in Switzerland and had to switch trains to get to a larger town. And I had started my life and thought in that moment I could get on a train and go anywhere. Nobody would know me. I'm free.

Obama: It's liberating but it's also—that can get old. In some ways I saw that in my mother, as somebody who had lived an expatriate life. She loved Indonesia—really found meaningful work there, made great friends—but at the end of the day didn't have a place that was solidly hers. And I think there were elements of that I saw as a kid as being lonely or a loss. There are always trade-offs in life.

Coates: Right. You know, certainly not the majority of the African American community, but certainly a privileged few of us are now raising children who are growing up—I'm thinking of my own son—with all these different experiences—

Obama: And options.

Coates: And options.

Obama: They're unconstrained.

Coates: Unconstrained. Is that need for home still there? Is that still important in the same way?

Obama: I think it is. It's interesting watching Malia and Sasha, who have obviously lived in as strange and unreal an environment as any kids do. They feel very strongly about their African American roots. They don't feel that they have to choose. And that, I think, is a great gift to bequeath them, where they know they've got a home, they know they've got a base, they know who they are. But they don't think that in any way constrains them. And certainly they are not burdened by the sorts of doubts that previous generations—and even our generation—might have felt in what it means to be black. They think being black and being free are not contradictory. It's interesting, when we went to visit the museum, Smithsonian [National Museum of African American History and Culture], just watching them soak it in. And they're well-informed young people, so they knew most of the history, and I forget which one of them just said, "I can't wait to bring my friends here." And I think she was not just referring to African American friends but her white friends. She said, "Because face it, our stuff's cool." We've got Michael Jordan, Beyoncé, Dr. King. What you got?

So there's a confidence that they project, which doesn't mean they're not mindful that there're still struggles. You hear them talking about what black women have to go through with hair and they'll go on a long rant—just the inconvenience and expense that they still feel is forced upon them, not just by the white community but the black community. They'll still notice a certain obliviousness of even their best friends on certain issues. But they don't feel trapped by that. They don't feel as if that's determinative of their possibilities. And I think they would say that the upsides really outweigh the downsides. They really like who we are. They like the community.

Coates: Do you recall the first time you were aware of folks saying, “Barack, you’re not really black”?

Obama: You know, it’s interesting. When I look back—and I kept journals during this time, I was really in my own head—but from the age of, say, 18 to 25, when I first moved from Hawaii and I’m living in L.A. and New York and ultimately Chicago, what strikes me is less the lack of acceptance and more just my own self-consciousness. That one of the wonderful things, I believe, about the African American community is the degree to which we embrace whoever it is that we’re with. So, socially, I never experienced being rebuffed. The friends I made in my first year in college who were African American, there was never that “You’re not black enough. You’re from Hawaii. Your mom is white.” There just wasn’t any of that. There were times where you’d feel it in terms of friendships and groups, right? Because you went to Howard, you’re in an all-black environment, that doesn’t come up.

**“I NEVER WANTED TO BE SOMEBODY WHO
LOOKED LIKE I WAS AVOIDING WHO I SAW IN
THE MIRROR.”**

I think I felt some tensions around: You’ve got your white friends, or you’ve got black friends, and they don’t necessarily hang together in the same ways. So you’re kind of doing shuttle diplomacy sometimes. Which is why I think some of my closest friends during those early years in college were Pakistani, or French, or people who themselves didn’t neatly fit in categories. But by the time I get to Chicago—and I’m still a young man at that point, I’m 25 years old—and I’m in the middle of the South Side of Chicago, there was a degree of familiarity, and love, and comfort that I guess in retrospect you might be puzzled by it. But it just fit.

Now, there were times as an organizer, and certainly when I ran for office, where that stuff got brought in tactically or strategically by folks who I was dealing with. So you got some pastor, some alderman, who didn’t like what we were trying to do, who says, “You know what? That guy, he’s got Jewish backing,” or “He’s working with this

Catholic church,” or “He’s from Hawaii.” When I ran against Bobby Rush: “He’s got that Harvard degree, and he’s from Hyde Park.” And so those themes would arise. But I always experienced those as just tactics being deployed by somebody who was pushing back on something I was trying to do.

Coates: Were you hurt, though? Personally hurt? Did it bother you on any level?

Obama: Again, it didn’t. Because of the experiences I had had in the neighborhoods, and communities, and with regular folks. Because that’s not how regular black folks think. They’re not sort of measuring on a day-to-day basis, *Okay, is what you’re doing a white thing, or is it a black thing?* Folks weren’t doing stuff like that. And in fact, among working-class black folks, you doing things that weren’t typical oftentimes was a source of pride. So I remember my first job out of college was working for this business magazine—subscription magazine—and I was the only African American there who wasn’t a delivery man or some tech-support guy. Most of the African Americans in the office were secretaries and, you know, they were proud that I was walking in there and working. So I think that gave me a base and a sense of confidence. So if somebody was playing a game later on, I know that *Well, they’re not speaking for, quote-unquote, “the authentic black experiences,” because I live with folks who are at least as authentic as you.* Sometimes it’s like these rappers who grew up in the suburbs and suddenly they’re all—

Coates: Gangsta.

Obama: Gangsta. It’s like, “Come on, man, I know you. I know who you are. Don’t pretend.”

Coates: I talked to quite a few people who knew you after that Bobby Rush race, and there were people who—Valerie [Jarrett] told me this—did not want you to run for the Senate. How personally—maybe you weren’t, I don’t know, maybe this doesn’t get to you—were you personally injured after that? Was it just like, *Oh my God, I don’t know if I can—*

Obama: No. I was upset about losing as bad as I did in that congressional race, and there’s no doubt it shook my confidence. But it wasn’t because of race. I remember campaigning in the congressional race, and it was a shoestring operation. I’d go meet people and I’d knock on doors and stuff, and some of the grandmothers who were the folks I’d been organizing and working with doing community stuff, they weren’t parroting back some notion of “You’re too Harvard,” or “You’re too Hyde Park,” or what

have you. They'd say, "You're a wonderful young man, you're going to do great things. You just have to be patient." So I didn't feel the loss as a rejection by black people. I felt the loss as "politics anywhere is tough." Politics in Chicago is especially tough. And being able to break through in the African American community is difficult because of the enormous loyalty that people feel towards anybody who has been around a while. Look at Marion Barry in D.C.—or you can come up with all kinds of stories. Generally, we are pretty loyal voters.

And so I think that the loss made me question my career choice not because of racial issues, but rather because it made me question whether, in fact, there was a path for me to be able to break through and have a platform to get the kind of things done that I wanted to get done. Or was I destined to just slog away in the state legislature until I'm 55, and then some congressional race comes up, and now I'm a backbencher in Congress—and is that how I wanted to spend the next 20 years? So those were the kinds of questions that I was asking myself.

Coates: One of the things you've done, that you do very, very successfully—one thing I don't think I've seen anybody really do—is speak about your roots, your ancestry, your family, and speak about your blackness without a sense of rejection of any of it: "I'm an African American and my grandfather was this and my mother was this," and you'd be very clear about it. Is that a story you always told yourself? Did you decide, *I have to figure out something and—*

Obama: No. By the time I was running for office, I think, I was sort of formed. That stretch that I described—maybe you want to stretch it out from the age of 18 to 27, when I go to law school—I was wrestling with myself and trying to game this out, and to figure this out, and it wasn't a smooth passage. When I look back at journal entries, when I read biographies of me that talk about that stretch, I'm full of confusion and turmoil and doubts. The degree to which my organizing work in Chicago, I think, solved a puzzle for me, I can't overstate.

And I've said this before: I didn't set the world on fire when I was doing that work. We had some small victories, and a whole lot of failures. The people I worked with and the communities I was serving gave so much more to me than I think I gave to them. It's hard to think how I could repay them. I still think about them in the Oval Office. It was a great gift they gave me, understanding who I was, or at least who I aspired to be. So that by the time I'm off to law school, I'm pretty formed at that point.

Coates: What was it that it gave you? What is the relationship between that and sorting out who you were? What happens there?

Obama: For me, and this may be different for other people, part of becoming an adult is linking your personal ambitions and striving to something bigger. And when I started doing that work, my story merges with a larger story. That happens naturally for a John Lewis. That happens more naturally for you. It was less obvious to me. *How do I pull all these different strains together: Kenya and Hawaii and Kansas, and white and black and Asian—how does that fit?* And through action, through work, I suddenly see myself as part of the bigger process for, yes, delivering justice for the [African American community], and specifically the South Side community, and low-income people—justice on behalf of the African American community. But also thereby promoting my ideas of justice and equality and empathy that my mother taught me were universal.

So I'm in a position to understand those essential parts of me not as separate and apart from any particular community but connected to every community. And I can fit the African American struggle for freedom and justice in the context of the universal aspiration for freedom and justice.

Which is why I've always said, and I continue to believe that, the struggle for racial equality in America has been the essential catalyst for America's growth and development. As painful as it is, as ugly as that history has often been, as hard as it's been on black folks themselves, it's the driver of the expanded moral commitment. And it continues. And because of it, we better understand other struggles. It helps stretch our moral imaginations to embrace the Latino farmworker, or the LGBT kid who is feeling ostracized, or the woman who is hitting the glass ceiling. So the work helped me form an integrated vision of the world and my place in it in a way that would not have happened if I had been a professor reading about it or writing about it, but they would just be intellectual exercises.

Coates: Did your mother ever get to see you working in Chicago?

Obama: She never went along with me. She was doing her own thing. When we visited it was typically in Hawaii. That stretch of time when I was organizing was a particularly busy time for her. So she always expressed pride about the work, and interestingly, it wasn't all that different from some of the work she was doing. She was out in poor villages trying to help people leverage microloans into a better life. Probably the moment where things most intersected in a way that she sees it is at

our wedding, which is why I end the book at the wedding. Because I've got some South Side folks there, I've got my boys from Hawaii there, I've got Pakistani friends there, I've got my Kenyan family there. And to see my mom talking to my mother-in-law, or my Kenyan sister; to have some folks from Altgeld come up to my mother and say, "You should be so proud of your son"; to see my grandmother, a little old Kansas white lady, interacting with some of Michelle's older relatives, little old black ladies, and they basically had the same tastes and attitudes—it was, I think, a moment where, in a very personal way, everything I talked about was made manifest. We still have the old video from our wedding, and when I watch it, it reminds me of how lucky I've been.

Coates: How difficult was it, thinking about that, when you had to sever your relationship with Reverend Wright during the campaign?

Obama: It was hard. Reverend Wright was an embodiment of so many positive trends that I saw in the black Church: strong, somebody who embraced learning, somebody who was socially conscious and taught black folks to respect themselves and the culture. He's somebody who was sophisticated enough to be pro-black without being antiwhite. The church itself was an amazing, and continues to be an amazing, institution. And he was a friend, somebody who I was very fond of. And there was and continues to be a translation problem between somebody like Reverend Wright and the larger society.

In a way that's true, I think, for all subcultures that are not part of the majority culture. There are things that are said in the barber shop, the beauty salon, or folks are just talking stuff, and there's a certain tolerance for exaggerations, for saying things for effect, for smack talking, that are complicated. They're not always meant literally as much as they are expressing emotions or making a point.

As I said in my speech in Philadelphia, the blind spots that he possessed are the blind spots that that generation of African American men at some moments all have possessed, it would be impossible not to possess. He grew up—he was 15 years older than me—if you're coming of age in the late '40s, early '50s, early '60s, or the '70s in Philadelphia, or Alabama, or Oakland, or Baltimore, it would be superhuman not to have some vestiges of anger, not to have internalized some conspiracy theorizing, to not have blind spots. I may have said this to you in the interview that we had, but I was rewatching Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. Did I say that to you?

Coates: No.

Obama: It just happened to be on a few weeks ago, and I was watching it. It was just a reminder: As crazy as Elijah Muhammad's philosophies were, if you went through what Malcolm Little goes through—

Coates: It all makes sense.

Obama: There's a plausibility to those theories as a way of you just explaining what is happening to you. And so Reverend Wright is part of that transition from a black community, in which its men and its women are trapped in a vicious social construction, to an environment that you and I grew up in, in which suddenly there's openings and spaces are cleared, in part because of the work that they did, in part because of the struggles, and fights, and the sharp edges, and the elbows, and mistakes—but ultimately victories and triumphs—of our parents and our grandparents.

To try to explain all that in a sound bite is impossible. To expect the broader American society to absorb that in the course of a political campaign was not possible. I did my best in my speech in Philadelphia. But recall that I'm not severing the relationship until the Press Club interview in which Reverend Wright, I think feeling hurt, feeling misunderstood, showing his age, doubled down in ways that actually I had not seen out of him in church or in my previous interactions.

Coates: From the outside, it looked like you didn't want to sever the relationship.

Obama: No. My hope was, after the Philadelphia speech, which wasn't clear to me was going to work and involved some risk, my hope was that that would contextualize what had happened. And look, the fact was that some of the quotes that he had that I hadn't heard—frankly, I wasn't in church every Sunday—were things I would have to reject, they were just wrong. The same way that, even after his trip to Mecca, Malcolm would still be saying some stuff that I said, "Well, that's just not right." So that saddened me. And anybody who has sat in Trinity, as I wrote about—his father is the amazing pastor who actually gave me the idea for the Joshua speech that I made the first time I went to Selma—anybody who has gone to Trinity and sat there would say it's a magnificent community that Reverend Wright built, and it's doing a lot of good.

But this is always one of the challenges of politics: It can never capture all the complexity and contradictions in life. So you end up having to try to be true in a way that

can be consumed for a mass audience, but you're always missing some elements of it. You're always leaving some things out.

And that's part of the reason why race is such a difficult thing to deal with in politics, because the evolution of racial identity, racial relationships, institutional racism, is never similar. The trajectory, I believe, has been positive. But anything you say on the topic of race, there's a counterargument, there's an exception, there's a nuance. There's a, *Wait, hold on a minute, how about that?* And that's part of the reason why, I think, it creates frustration. It's also why it's easy to demagogue. It's also why situations that look ambiguous can lead to people dividing into camps very quickly.

We think of the two episodes of me running for president, or being president, that on their face, should not have been as charged as they were. The first is when I say at the end of a long day, towards the end of a long campaign, that part of the reason that you had a lot of working-class whites supporting a Republican agenda that on its face doesn't seem to be serving their interest is because they've given up hope that the system is going to look out for them. They feel it's rigged. So their attitude is that, *If you're not going to help me get a job, if you're not going to do anything concrete for me, then at least I'm going to cling onto my religion and my Second Amendment rights.*

And I said that not from an unsympathetic perspective. I was saying something that every writer now who's writing about Trump voters is saying: that these communities feel ignored, and so it's much easier for them to think in terms of those constants in their identity. But just by saying, "They cling to their guns and Bibles" made it, as David Axelrod said right after I said it, anthropological, made it sound patronizing, and to this day is the primary proof point that is used to argue that I am not sympathetic towards those communities, that I'm sort of this elitist, coastal liberal, and in part responsible for the backlash to my presidency. And if I had been a white person saying the exact same thing, it wouldn't have played the same way. If I had said it the way I meant it or felt it, it would have been absorbed differently. But because there was a racial component to it, immediately it becomes a permanent talking point.

And then you've got Skip Gates being arrested, which, to me, I was saying something pretty obvious. They ended up handcuffing this middle-aged, elderly man on his own porch. No matter how much he cursed you out, you overreacted, and it probably would not have happened had there not been some assumptions about who he was based on his race. Again, immediately folks ignored the discussion.

So this is part of the reason why when I hear people say we need a dialogue about race, or we need commissions on race, or this or that, I'm always somewhat skeptical, because trying to engineer those kinds of conversations on a national level in a way that could actually capture reality is very hard. What can happen, I think, is for us to act in ways that show mutual regard, propose policies that safeguard against obvious discrimination, extend ourselves in our personal lives and in our political lives in ways that lead us to see the other person as a human worthy of respect. It's what we do more than what we say, I ultimately think, that saves us. All right?

Coates: All right.

Obama: You got a lot, man. You should be able to write something.



IAN ALLEN

“Surprised Like Everybody Else”: Obama on the Election of Donald Trump

The fourth in a series of conversations between the president and Ta-Nehisi Coates

In “[My President Was Black](#),” Ta-Nehisi Coates examined Barack Obama’s tenure in office and his legacy. The story was built, in part, around a series of conversations he had with the president. This is a transcript of the final of those four encounters, which took place by phone after the election, on November 17, 2016.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Hello.

Barack Obama: Hey, man, how are you doing?

Coates: I'm okay. How are you, Mr. President?

Obama: Well, I'm doing fine. I'm in Germany, so this is how I roll this week, I guess. I guess I've got some business back home in between doing my business out here.

Coates: Yeah, I guess it's about 10 o'clock at night over there.

Obama: Yeah, but it's all right. I'm a night owl. And I didn't think this needed to be a long conversation. I just figured that after all our conversation before the election, and then in the wake of the election, that you might need a very brief follow-up question. And I wanted to make sure that you had a chance because I know that you had to finish that story.

Coates: Yeah, I appreciate that, and I did not think of this as a very long conversation, either. If you don't mind, I have three questions. Is that okay?

Obama: It may be. It depends on what they are.

Coates: Okay. All right.

Obama: If they're too long or difficult, then I'll pretend that we got cut off.

Coates: All right, well, I'll try to get through this. I'll see what I can do here. The first thing I would ask is, we had this conversation very early in our session, and you talked about the belief that what the American people most want from a candidate is an optimistic vision. And I believe you were referencing Donald Trump at the time, and it was your thought that it was hard to get elected with a gloom-and-doom message. And I just wonder what you take from this election given what happened, and how your theory reconciles with that.

Obama: Well, look, I think I am absolutely, you know, surprised like everybody else with the outcome. So, you know, I don't want to pretend like I was anticipating the results. I do think, though, that when you look at the specifics of this race, it is hard to, I think, draw a grand theory from it, because there were just some very unusual circumstances. We ended up having a situation in which both candidates had very high negatives. I think the caricature of Hillary Clinton that developed as a consequence of all kinds of stuff, compounded in that last week with more news about emails, meant that people never really got to hear a positive, optimistic message. Hillary

Clinton had all kinds of terrific policies, but that was just not the focus of coverage. And as a consequence, you ended up having not just a polarized electorate, but a fairly dispirited electorate. It meant that a lot of the people who voted for me didn't turn out to vote—that a lot of people who, if the surveys are correct, approve of my work and my presidency didn't vote or decided, *You know what, let's just shake it up this time*. And you know, it's just an indication of the structural challenges that progressive politics have always faced in this country.

You know, we are a country that makes it harder to vote than most countries. We are a country in which the campaigns are so long and so expensive that by the time you get to the end of it, negative campaigning dominates as opposed to a proactive set of proposals. We have an electoral college that mirrors, you know, the states' power that was preserved in the design of the Senate, where, you know, small states, or more rural states, or states with, you know, large rural or less diverse populations have significantly more influence in some cases than massive states like California. And so, you know, you add all that up and you ended up getting the specific result that we got.

But as I have said publicly in all the interviews that I've conducted since the election, to be optimistic about the long-term trends of the United States doesn't mean that everything is going to go in a smooth, direct, straight line. It, you know, goes forward sometimes, sometimes it goes back, sometimes it goes sideways, sometimes it zigs and zags. And, you know, the important thing that I'm hoping everybody draws from this is anybody who thinks that opting out of the system is a smart protest move, anybody who thinks that disengaging from the political process because "both parties are the same" or "both candidates are the same" or "none of them are getting at the structural issues that are ultimately going to make the biggest difference"—you know, those approaches can result in Donald Trump being elected president.

Coates: I'm going to skip to my third question, because it's important I get to it. I don't want to get accidentally cut off here.

Obama: I was teasing. I wouldn't actually—but I appreciate that you took it seriously.

Coates: I did. One of the things I wanted to ask you—and this really comes personally from my own concerns—we have this history in our country where national-security policy is directed at a certain foe—for instance, earlier in the 20th century at communism during the Cold War—and sometimes, when in the wrong hands, it expands out. And in the '60s it expanded out into the civil-rights movement. In the post-9/11

world, the office of the presidency has accumulated quite a bit of powers in terms of national security. Are you concerned at all about that stuff—now that there’s somebody else—being directed at activists, at Black Lives Matter, people like that? Are you worried about that?

Obama: Yeah, I have to say that this is an argument that I know was made in a *New York Times* article and you’ve heard in some progressive circles, and it’s just not accurate. Keep in mind that the capacity of the [National Security Agency] or other surveillance tools are specifically prohibited from being applied to U.S. citizens or U.S. persons without specific evidence of links to terrorist activity or other foreign-related activity. And those laws have been in place and have been strengthened, and the capacities that have been developed over the last eight years of my presidency mainly derive from changes in technology, not because we’ve somehow weakened oversight or expanded executive power. It just has to do with the fact that everybody is using a cellphone, everybody is using emails.

In terms of domestic surveillance of any sort, it’s probably harder to surveil or use

“TO BE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE LONG-TERM TRENDS OF THE UNITED STATES DOESN’T MEAN THAT EVERYTHING IS GOING TO GO IN A SMOOTH, DIRECT, STRAIGHT LINE.”

these tools with a smartphone than it was getting a wiretap for a land phone. And both would be illegal without probable cause. So you know, I think this whole story line that somehow Big Brother has massively expanded and now that a new president is in place it’s this loaded gun ready to be used on domestic dissent is just not accurate. It doesn’t match up with how these things are organized. Now, I think it’s absolutely important to be concerned that our criminal-justice system, the FBI, the Justice Department, law enforcement take seriously civil liberties. Because the possibility of abuse by government officials always exists. The issue is not going to be that there

are new tools available; the issue is making sure that the incoming administration, like my administration, takes the constraints on how we deal with U.S. citizens and persons seriously. And that's not a technical issue; that's the degree to which we abide by the law.

Coates: Right. Right. Okay, third, final question. In one of your speeches you made this very explicit appeal to black voters, and you mentioned if we didn't come out, this would be an insult to your legacy. And at least in the early numbers, it looks like we did not—we certainly did not come out in the numbers that we came out in in 2008 or 2012.

Obama: Right.

Coates: How are you feeling? Is this campaign right? Do you feel insulted? Or what are you left with?

Obama: No, you know, I mean, I think that I was trying to make a very specific point, which is that you can't rely on inspiration to take care of your business. If you were a strong supporter of me, and loved Michelle, and believed in everything we were doing, and stood in line for four hours to vote for us in '08, and put up with some more lines in '12, then you can't stay at home in '16 because we're not on the ballot. That there's a direct line between the work we did and the handoff we needed to make to the next administration to ensure that that progress was sustained. And ultimately, I'm not entirely surprised that there was some slippage. That wasn't just among African American voters. It was among young voters, and, you know, those were costly in the places where it really mattered in some of the swing states. It just reflects the nature of our political process, where we do not think of voting and political participation as a routine responsibility and duty, but rather think of it as something we do when it's exciting. Now, look, I don't want to make generalizations across the board, because the truth is, the African American vote actually exceeded the white vote in terms of percentage—not absolute numbers, obviously, but the percentage who voted—in 2012. And that was probably not entirely sustainable.

On the other hand, we've got more ground to make up. We've got more schools that are underfunded. We've got more youth that are unemployed. We've got more people who are struggling to pay the bills. And, you know, one of the difficult truths of democracy is that the people who would benefit most from progressive policies like raising the minimum wage, and investment in infrastructure, and strengthening

unions, and affordable child care, and help on college access and affordability—those are the folks also that, for a whole variety of reasons, are less likely to vote. And it requires an enormous amount of energy to overcome that historical fact. We were able to do it in 2008 and 2012, but it's hard to sustain. And then one of things that I'll be spending a lot of time thinking about once I'm out of office is: How do we change those habits? How do we make our engagement and involvement and interest an everyday thing rather than an every-four-years thing or an every-eight-years thing?

Coates: Okay.

Obama: All right?

Coates: That's it. Thank you so much, Mr. President. I appreciate you taking this time.

Obama: All right, man. Take care.



IAN ALLEN

Obama Failed to Mitigate America's Foreclosure Crisis

The country's first black president contributed to a significant disintegration of wealth for people of color.

BY DAVID DAYEN | DEC 14, 2016

In "[My President Was Black](#)," Ta-Nehisi Coates ably documents the material and representational advances of the past eight years. But any rendering of Barack Obama's legacy is incomplete without including his failure to arrest the foreclosure crisis, or to hold anyone accountable for the widespread damage it inflicted. In fact,

reading Coates's hymn to the Obama era, I couldn't stop thinking about a different Chicago resident I met this year.

I was in St. Louis, giving a talk for a [book](#) I wrote about the foreclosure crisis. The skies erupted minutes before the event, and few battled the rainstorm to join the audience. But when I asked for questions, Andy Williams Jr. stood up, dreadlocks scraping his shoulders, and said, "David, you are a hard man to find." Williams drove five hours that day, from Chicago to St. Louis, to tell me about his 11-year foreclosure ordeal, initiated, he claimed, after his loan servicer misapplied his payments, charged illegal fees, and fraudulently signed him up for homeowner's insurance when he already had it.

A paralegal, Williams started collecting stories of the servicer's tactics, compiling them into an as-yet-unpublished 200-page book. He not only fought his own case—it's still in federal court—but he helped grow six law firms in the Chicago area, to protect others at risk of dispossession. It's an uphill battle. "I just don't think a borrower will ever have a real chance of justice or leveling the playing field," Williams told me last week.

Should Williams exhaust his appeals, he'd join [the more than 9.3 million American families](#) who have lost their properties since the housing bubble collapsed, either to foreclosure or to an associated transaction. Given the [average household size](#) in the United States, that likely represents more than 20 million people forced to uproot their lives and find shelter. This had a particularly gruesome effect on people of color, who stored more of their wealth in home equity and were targeted for subprime loans. Coates points out that white households now hold seven times as much wealth as black households; he doesn't mention how [that statistic grew worse under President Obama](#), mostly because of foreclosures. Former Representative Brad Miller calls the crisis "[an extinction event](#)" for the black and Latino middle class.

I agree with Coates that "there is nothing mere about symbols," and Obama's meaning to black America looms large. But that achievement must contend with Obama's culpability for the greatest disintegration of black wealth in recent memory.

If Obama ever reads this critique, I suspect he'd mutter under his breath, as he disclosed to Coates he does habitually when confronted with activist demands. "Where I got frustrated at times was the belief that the president can do anything if he just decides he wants to do it," Obama grumbles.

Nothing is sadder than a man who disclaims his power to preserve his reputation. The presidency is subject to countless veto points and constraints, but the foreclosure disaster was unique; Congress had already given the incoming president the authority to act.

Obama the candidate ran on allowing bankruptcy judges to cut balances on primary mortgages; Obama's administration actively whipped against the policy. Obama's transition team earmarked up to \$100 billion in funds appropriated through Bush's bank bailout to mitigate foreclosures; eight years later only about \$21 billion has been spent. Obama the president promised 4 million mortgage modifications; to date less than 1 million have been successfully achieved.

No Republican sign-off was necessary for Obama's Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP). The Treasury Department alone decided to run it through mortgage companies that had financial incentives to foreclose rather than modify loans. Treasury never saw the program as a relief vehicle, but a way to "foam the runway" for the banks, allowing them to absorb inevitable foreclosures more slowly. In that scenario, homeowners were the foam being crushed by a jumbo jet in that scenario, squeezed for as many payments as possible before ultimately losing their homes.

Worst of all, most of these foreclosures were executed fraudulently. Banks neglected centuries-old property-records laws, and used millions of forged and fabricated documents as evidence in courtrooms and county offices to paper over their mistakes. When this came to light in fall 2010, the leading mortgage companies stopped foreclosing because they could no longer do so legally.

But Obama's Justice Department did not use this newfound leverage to obtain equitable solutions for struggling families. It didn't prosecute those responsible for fraud. It reached a series of bank settlements that provided little meaningful relief. Fraudulent documents still get used in foreclosures today. And of course, no high-ranking executive saw the inside of a jail cell.

Coates cites the Shirley Sherrod fiasco as a "rare act of cowardice" for Obama. But Rick Santelli's rant about "the losers' mortgages," which Coates also highlights, paralyzed the White House from aiding anyone other than "responsible borrowers," an echo of Obama's constant haranguing of irresponsible black fathers. The president never sliced up "responsible" and "irresponsible" banks in this fashion; instead, Wall Street's balance sheets were privileged ahead of homeowners'. This decision didn't

just abandon millions in a time of need, it stunted the recovery, squandering Obama's political capital rather than conserving it.

But it's worse than that. This past year has made clear that America's social fabric is fragile. When you let private companies distort a government program into a foreclosure-creating machine, when you allow the largest consumer fraud in American history to occur without sanction, you tear at that social fabric. You create a rot at the heart of American democracy. You teach the public that the rules don't apply to the wealthy and powerful. And people respond with cynicism and rage. Coates squarely blames racism for the rise of Trump. But the destruction of faith in institutions also plowed that pathway. Obama sapped that faith when he could have restored it. And now his party, the one that believes government can act to protect its citizens, is at its lowest ebb in 90 years.

Andy Williams Jr. is as emblematic of Chicago's black political tradition as Barack Obama is. Williams reflects the community-organizing impulse, focusing on "delivering justice on behalf of the African American community," to use Obama's words. But he needed a president to help him achieve that justice. His president never answered the call. ■

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IAN ALLEN

How Barack Obama Failed Black Americans

The country's first black president never pursued policies bold enough to close the racial wealth gap.

WILLIAM A. DARITY JR. | DEC 22, 2016

Born in 1953, I am a child of the waning years of legal segregation in the United States. My parents, on the other hand, spent about 40 years of their lives under Jim Crow, and all of my grandparents lived most of their lives under official American apartheid. At the time of Barack Obama's election to the presidency in 2008, my mother and all four of my grandparents were deceased. But my father was alive and

well—and absolutely thrilled to have lived to see the election of a black man as president of the United States. Usually deeply cynical about American politics and politicians, my dad could not comprehend my deep reservations about Barack Obama's leadership. Indeed, he viewed any criticism of Obama as bringing aid and comfort to white supremacists.

My father hardly was alone among black Americans, across all generations. The near unanimity of passionate black American admiration for Obama carried with it an absolute resistance to hearing any complaint about the black president. And, indeed, there was much to admire: an exceptional résumé, an attractive family with a black wife who is his professional and intellectual equal, an image as handsome and grey-ing toward distinguished maturity, a strategically wise moderate-progressive political

LEADERS WHO LOOK LIKE YOU DO NOT NECESSARILY ACT IN WAYS THAT BENEFIT YOU.

position, and status as the—sometimes self-professed—messianic fulfillment of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s. For many black Americans, the ascent of Barack Obama to the presidency was equivalent to the moment of Jubilee.

An extraordinarily disciplined individual, Barack Obama preempted the smallest hint of scandal by admitting that he had smoked pot during his youth. He even crafted a narrative of a rise from adversity—growing up with a missing father and becoming successful thanks to the efforts of a single mother—albeit a white single mother with a Ph.D. whose own parents were affluent residents of Hawaii. With every drop of respectability in place, he was an inordinately appealing candidate, his somewhat icy intellect coupled with his enthusiasm for basketball and black music across a half century of styles representing an ideal combination of the cool and the rational.

For many white Americans, his election, and reelection, confirmed their belief that American racism is a thing of the past. But an underemphasized dimension of each of Obama's presidential campaigns—a dimension patently relevant to the most recent presidential election—is the reality that he received only a minority of white votes. In

fact, he would have been swept away in a landslide had only whites been the voters. In 2008, 55 percent of white voters cast their ballots for John McCain; in 2012, 59 percent of white voters cast their ballots for Mitt Romney.

Nevertheless, some of those white voters who did not cast their ballot for him took his eight years as president as license to assert that the country was post-racial, even while attacking him with both veiled and overt racial slurs. But racism is organic to American life, and it sits at the core of persistence of racial economic inequality. In his fascinating profile of Obama, Ta-Nehisi Coates refers to the “mark of a system engineered to place one on top of the other”—to place white over black. He offers some examples: the facts that blacks with a college degree have an unemployment rate almost as high as white high-school graduates, that completion of a college education leads blacks to carry twice the level of student-loan debt that whites carry four years after earning the degree, that blacks experience a significantly higher default rate on their loans, that black households have one-seventh of the wealth of white households, and that black families with \$100,000 or more in income reside “in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than white families making less than \$30,000.”

Sadly, these actually are softer illustrations of “the mark of the system” than findings that have emerged from research I have done with Darrick Hamilton, Anne Price, and other members of the National Asset Scorecard for Communities of Color (NASCC) research team. We find a much higher discrepancy between black and white wealth than the gap that Coates reports. Blacks with some college education actually have *higher* unemployment rates than whites who never finished high school. At each level of education, the black rate of unemployment is twice as high as the white rate. Moreover, the *relative* economic positions of blacks and whites on virtually all indicators, including the racial unemployment-rate gap, has not improved since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Estimates generated from the 2013 round of the Federal Reserve’s Survey of Consumer Finances indicate that the median black household has *one-13th* of the wealth of the median white household. We have concluded that the average black household would have to save 100 percent of its income for three consecutive years to close the wealth gap. The key source of the black-white wealth gap is the intergenerational effects of transfers of resources. White parents have far greater resources to give to their children via gifts and inheritances, so that the typical white young adult starts his or her working life with a much greater initial net worth than the typical black young adult. These intergenerational effects are blatantly non-meritocratic.

Indeed, the history of black wealth deprivation—from the failure to provide ex-slaves with 40 acres and a mule to the violent destruction of black property in white riots, to the seizure and expropriation of black-owned land, to the impact of racially restrictive covenants on homeownership, to the discriminatory application of policies like the GI Bill and the FHA—created the foundation for a perpetual racial wealth gap.

Blacks working full-time have lower levels of wealth than whites who are unemployed. Blacks in the third quintile of the income distribution have less wealth (or a lower net worth) than whites in the lowest quintile. Even more damning for any presumption that America is free of racism is our finding that black households whose heads have college degrees are worth \$10,000 less than white households whose heads never finished high school. As we point out in our report, “[Umbrellas Don’t Make It Rain](#),” [PDF] studying hard and working hard do not enable blacks to overcome the racial wealth gap. Doing the right thing is far from enough.

I had a queasy feeling about Barack Obama’s candidacy from the moment I heard his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech that lifted him into national prominence, a speech that Coates summarizes in the profile. Toward the end of the speech, Obama observed that black families in urban centers realized “that government alone can’t teach our kids to learn ... that children can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.” “The acting white” libel—a myth that will not die—argues that low school performance for black students is a product of a culturally based black opposition to high academic achievement.

I long have been baffled by the tenacious hold this argument has on the American imagination. After all, black families have fought for education for their children against insuperable odds from slavery times. White students who label their high-achievers “geeks” and “nerds” have no less a degree of anti-intellectualism. In fact, they may have a higher degree of anti-intellectualism, since black students get *more* years of schooling and *more* credentials than do white students from families with the same level of parental income or education. In our research for the NASCC project, we discovered that black parents who provide some financial support for their children’s higher education have one-third of the wealth of white parents who provide *no* financial support for their children’s higher education. Black culture, if anything, has been ferociously supportive of education.

The “acting white” libel is symptomatic of a more general perspective, which argues that an important factor in explaining racial economic disparities is self-defeating or dysfunctional behavior on the part of blacks themselves. Of course, there are some black folks who engage in habits that undermine their potential accomplishments, but there are some white folks who engage in habits that undermine their potential accomplishments as well. And there is no evidence that proportionately more blacks behave in ways that undercut achievement, especially since it is clear that *blacks do more with less*. Nevertheless, Barack Obama consistently has trafficked heavily in the tropes of black dysfunction. Either he is unfamiliar with or uninterested in the evidence that contradicts the black-behavioral-deficiency narrative. These tropes, in my view, have malicious effects.

MY BROTHER’S KEEPER IS A PROGRAM PREMISED ON THE VIEW THAT YOUNG BLACK MEN CONSTITUTE A SOCIAL PROBLEM.



I worried that the symbolic and inspirational aspects of having a black president might be more than offset by the damages that could be done by a black president’s messages. And it has been damaging to have Barack Obama, a black man speaking from the authoritative platform of the presidency, reinforce the widely held belief that racial inequality in the United States is, in large measure, the direct responsibility of black folks. This has been the deal-breaker for me: that Obama has not merely been silent on white physical and emotional violence against black Americans, but denied of the centrality of American racism in explaining sustained black-white disparity.

Obama does acknowledge that ongoing discrimination is a partial factor explaining racial inequality and says that antidiscrimination enforcement is the type of black-specific measure that he can endorse. Of course, antidiscrimination laws do not operate exclusively on behalf of black folks. They really are universal measures intended to contain all forms of discrimination, and, while effective enforcement can improve black employment opportunities, it will do little to address massive, inherited racial wealth differences.

Obama's general position is that racial equality can be achieved—or at least approached—via policies that uplift all Americans experiencing poverty and deprivation. Obama has said that “as a general matter, my view would [be] that if you want to get at African American poverty, income gap, wealth gap, achievement gap, that the most important thing is to make sure that the society as a whole does right by people who are poor, are working class, are aspiring to a better life for their kids: higher minimum wages, full-employment programs, early-childhood education, those kinds of programs are by design universal but by definition, because they are helping folks who are in the worst economic situations, are most likely to disproportionately impact and benefit black Americans.”

But these particular programs—all, even in their diluted forms, likely to be threatened under the new regime—are incremental and display no boldness of spirit. Obama's evocation of the notion that “better is good” and his own acknowledgment that “maybe I'm just not being sufficiently optimistic or imaginative” is testament to his inveterate cautiousness. The timid nature of these policy changes dooms their disproportionate benefit for blacks to be marginal at best.

A higher minimum wage does not ensure that individuals, black or white, actually will have jobs, nor does it insure adequate hours of work to generate non-poverty incomes. Full-employment policies under the Obama administration have meant old-fashioned Keynesian stimulus that relies heavily upon the unpredictable response of the private sector to the prompt of government expenditures. Quality early-childhood education for all is wonderful, but the racial achievement gap widens most dramatically during later years of schooling. Furthermore, none of these policies promise any significant effect on the most pernicious economic disparity—the racial wealth gap.

Admittedly, there is one major initiative that the Obama administration has inaugurated that is black-specific, but it is the exception that proves the rule. It exposes all the issues at play. My Brother's Keeper is a program premised on the view that young black men constitute a social problem and need interventions that will alter their outlook and actions. The focus is on reforming young men rather than directly increasing the resources possessed by them and their families and removing the constraints they face. Again, the underlying ideological motivation is the belief in black cultural deficiency, and again, this type of initiative is another expression of failure to pursue bold policies that confront the fundamental causes of racial disparity in American society.

The Obama administration never gave serious consideration to aggressive, transformative policies like a public-sector employment guarantee for all Americans, a federally financed trust fund for all newborn infants with amounts dictated by their parents' wealth position, or the provision of gifted-quality education for all children. These are universal programs that can have a "disproportionate impact and benefit for African Americans," in the process of helping all Americans—unlike the types of universal programs endorsed by the president.

And the emphasis on exclusively universal programs yields the spectacle of a black president who opposes the most dramatic black-specific program of all—reparations for African Americans. This opposition ultimately seems to amount to a matter of political expediency. In his conversation with Coates, the president appears to acknowledge that there is a sound moral and philosophical case for reparations, particularly if—as Coates presses him to concede—incremental changes in existing social programs will not close the gaps, especially the racial wealth gap. The president ultimately takes the position that it is politically untenable to enact a reparations program. If so—and if nothing comparable can be realized—then I contend that it is impossible to close the racial wealth gap.

IF BLACK REPARATIONS IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO, THEN WE SHOULD WORK TO MAKE IT HAPPEN, NO MATTER HOW LONG THE ODDS.



But why does Obama believe it is impossible? He says, "It is hard to think of any society in human history in which a majority population has said that as a consequence [of] historic wrongs we are now going to take a big chunk of the nation's resources over a long period of time, to make that right." The United States has taken a small chunk of the nation's resources over a short period of time to try to make right the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. Malaysia's New Economic Policy has taken a large chunk of the nation's resources over a long period of time to correct the inferior position of the native Malays. However, the native Malays are a numerical majority in their country who also are the recipients of the wealth-redistribution program conducted there.

There is no doubt that the political obstacles to congressional approval of black reparations are significant. But in 1820 in the United States one might not have been able to conceive that American slavery would ever come to an end, yet there were some who advocated abolition. In 1950 in South Africa one might not have been able to imagine that apartheid would ever come to an end, yet there were activists who already had begun to oppose the system. If black reparations is the right thing to do—and I know in the depth of my soul that it is—then we should work to make it happen, no matter how long the odds. We should not bow at the altar of presumed political expediency.

After all, it may be the case that the president simply is wrong about the impossibility of making reparations happen. His deference to achieving “the better” over the determination to achieve “the best” may be a mistake. There are times when the effort to get to “the better”—the marginal change that appears to be an improvement—is so exhausting that its accomplishment becomes a barrier to getting to the best. Mark Gomez at the Haas Institute at Berkeley has said time and again in municipal struggles for minimum-wage increases that the “Fight for 15” is easier than a “fight for 10.”

And sometimes Obama’s careful assessments of the political landscape are wrong. For example, he has said repeatedly that you do not win elections by telling the American people that things are going wrong. But that is precisely what Donald Trump did in winning the most recent presidential campaign. Black reparations can become a legitimate policy claim if and when a majority of Americans are convinced that it is an idea with merit. As Obama’s two elections demonstrate, it does not necessarily require a majority of *white* Americans to support such a program. The political challenge is to forge that national majority, presumably with approximately 40 percent of white Americans on board.

Having a black president oppose reparations does not help the cause, particularly when that black president makes the case that an important source of black disadvantage is black folks’ own behavior. But black America should have paid attention to the experience of post-colonial black Africa and the Caribbean: Leaders who look like you do not necessarily act in ways that benefit you. So be it. The struggle for reparations—and for black lives and justice—must and will continue, with or without Barack Obama in the fold. **A**

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IAN ALLEN

The Problem With Obama's Faith in White America

The president's optimism about race blinded him to the pervasiveness and stubborn persistence of racism.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM | DEC 13, 2016

SCREAMED A LOT while reading Ta-Nehisi Coates's "[My President Was Black](#)." When I was done reading and screaming, I cried.

The last time I felt this far removed from this president was when I first worked so hard to elect him.

In 2007, the very idea of a President Barack Obama was ridiculous to me. I was and am southern, God bless. I am black. I come from black people who were southerners

even when they were New Yorkers for a spell. We are the black-American story of enslavement, rural migration, urban displacement, resistance, bootstrapping, mobility, and class fragility. In this milieu, we, as a friend once described it, know our whites. To know our whites is to understand the psychology of white people and the elasticity of whiteness. It is to be intimate with some white persons but to withhold faith in white people categorically. It is to anticipate white people's emotions and fears and grievances because their issues are singularly our problem. To know our whites is to survive without letting bitterness rot our soul.

That's what I was dealing with when I went to my first Obama house party in 2007—a few generations' worth of lived and inherited expertise in knowing our whites. Our whites are southern, like me. Even if they spent some time in places north and west, to be white in the South is to absorb some large part of its particular iteration of the U.S. racial hierarchy. The house party was being held in Myers Park, a lush, wealthy in-town enclave in Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte was my home. I knew Myers Park as a place and a symbolic map of the city's racist histories. Myers Park is gorgeous. The streets are wide. The homes are stately without being garish. The residents are mere miles from the center of the city's banking, employment, transportation, and entertainment hubs. As neighborhoods throughout Charlotte fell victim to blight during the housing crash of the 2000s, Myers Park remained stable, thriving even, with housing values continuing to rise year-over-year.

Myers Park is also, as one with even a cursory knowledge of how wealth works in the United States would know, the benefactor of years of racist covenant restrictions and redlining. Myers Park is beautiful because it has encoded its whiteness into the mundane market transactions that we rarely see: zoning, planning, investment, homeowners associations. White people in Myers Park, no matter where they came from, are *of* Myers Park whether they acknowledge it or not.

I grew up knowing those whites. They mostly go to private school. When they don't, they make the public high school (Myers Park High School, naturally) function like a private school. They donate to area charities and lobby to keep the uncharitable from their neighborhoods and lives. I could not believe the Obama house party was happening in Myers Park of all places in the city.

The party was in one of the homes usually accessible to someone like me only twice a year, when you can pay \$15 or so for one of those charity parades of homes. I was

early. When I rang the bell a young white woman, still wet from a shower, told me to come on in but that no one was yet there. I sat for almost half an hour as they finished preparing, acutely aware of my social faux pas. More people arrived, of all ages and walks of life, but I was the only black person until almost an hour into the house party. That's when a brother carrying a bicycle arrived with his white girlfriend.

The hosts asked for donations without stuttering the way that I still do when I have to do "the ask." It was taken for granted that you had come to spend money and had money to spend. Here, a full eight years before mobile credit-card payments would penetrate my black hair salon or Saturday swap meets, the hosts took mobile payments using a website. The whites in this room were all in for Obama. They talked about him like old black people talk about Martin Luther King. They loved his biography. They embraced his political mantra. They were positive he could win.

WHITE VOTERS ALLOWED BARACK OBAMA BECAUSE THEY ALLOWED HIM TO EXIST AS A PROJECTION OF THEMSELVES.



Back at home, the black people I know were positive that white people were crazy to think he could win. My mother told me as much: "White people are crazy." She, like me, knew her whites. I went home that night and told her that I had seen white people doing what people do: coalescing around shared interests. Only this time their shared interests converged with my own. These white people were not new. They still had more money, more power than we had. They were as young as me but lived in million-dollar estates. They would still negotiate the daily experience of racial segregation in their neighborhoods and schools and jobs, but they had, for a million reasons, chosen a black man as "their guy."

"I've never seen anything like it, Ma," I told her. "But this black man can win."

Today, my mother has no fewer than 19 portraits and commemorative magazine covers of Barack and Michelle Obama on her mantelpiece. She has exactly three pictures of me, for reference. She has only one of her husband, something that annoys

him to no end. She hangs up the phone with me if Barack is giving a speech and she would, I am sure, trade me for Sasha and Malia in a heartbeat.

At the time, back in 2007, my mother could not believe that a black man with a funny name who so clearly did not know his whites stood a chance.

What convinced her finally? A house party, also in Myers Park. I dragged her there. She almost didn't get out of the car. But when she did, she saw it, too. It wasn't that Barack Obama knew his whites—it was that whites knew Obama.

Coates argues that Obama knows his whites because he was born to them, raised and loved by them. For this reason, Coates says, Obama was able to offer white Americans “something very few African Americans could—trust.” Obama's faith in white people's goodness and white America's capacity to rise above racism runs throughout his presidency and Coates's moving, infuriating, eloquent memorial for our first black president.

The essay *is* moving. That is because Coates wrote it. And on the eve of Donald Trump's presidency, the essay is all the more moving. Many black people will never again have a moment when they feel as American, for good or for ill, as many of us have felt the past eight years. Many of us will never again feel safe from history, seeing it reassert its racist, sexist violence so forcefully back into our political sphere. The essay is also infuriating. It attributes so much of Obama's improbable presidency to his inimitable faith in white Americans' higher self, something I can describe only as Obama's painful rejection of black folks' agency. The theory that Obama could be elected president because his white family had imbued him with an authentic love for and faith in white people that the typical black American does not have is intuitive but wrong.

I suspect, given Obama's own words over hours of conversations with Coates, that he believes he really does have some special insight into white people's better angels. Nothing is more emblematic of the problem with this theory than Obama's assessment of Donald Trump's election chances to Coates: “He couldn't win.” Obama's faith in white Americans is not better insight into their soul, where presumably the mythical “racist bones” can be found. Obama's faith, like the theory that it made Obama's presidency possible, misunderstands race as something black folks can choose without white folks' assent. White voters allowed Barack Obama because they allowed him to exist as a projection of themselves. It is seductive to believe

Obama could shape that in some way, much less control and direct it. But, as Coates details in case after painful case of political obstructionism among Democrats and Republicans during the first black president's terms, Obama never had the ability to shape white people's attitudes. White people's attitudes, the contradictions of their racial identities and class-consciousness, made Obama.

It didn't matter that Obama had faith in white people; they needed only to have faith in him: in his willingness to reflect their ideal selves back at them, to change the world without changing them, to change blackness for them without being black to them. Here, what is referred to alternately in Coates's essay as Obama's "hybridity" and "two-ness" and "biracial" identity may have mattered. It mattered not because of how it shaped Obama but because of how it made white voters feel about themselves. The black world and the white world that Coates describes are important to understand. There is a black norm only because there is a white norm, and vice versa. Sociology offers several theories about those who are born or socialized into two cultures at once. These people have been called liminal or marginal, for being suspended between two societies. For some people this means someone like Obama has special insight into both cultures. That insight supposedly breeds empathy. That kind of empathy may be why Obama could look at years of pictures of his wife and children drawn as apes and decades of white backlash to perceived black socioeconomic gains as *racial*, albeit not *racist*: "I'm careful not to attribute any particular resistance or slight or opposition to race." That is catnip to millions of white voters.

MY FIRST BLACK PRESIDENT SEEMS TO THINK HE CAN HAVE BLACK COOL WITHOUT BLACK BURDEN.

The other interpretation of the liminality, or double-consciousness, that Obama is said to represent is more complicated. Not only does one trapped between two sets of social norms understand each better, but he is often blinded to the ways in which they are in conflict. Duality can breed insight, but it can also breed delusions. The challenge of holding two sets of social selves, two ways of being and understanding the world, at one time is to soften the edges so much that for the liminal, the edges no longer exist.

The black president that Ta-Nehisi Coates describes is one who thinks he could have ever really “embraced” or “chosen” blackness. He seems to truly believe that he exercised some great act of charity and agency in adopting black cool. My first black president seems to think that he can raise his daughters to believe in systemic racism without legitimizing the idea of systemic reparations. He thinks that he can be his brother’s keeper without changing the world that keeps his brothers in bad jobs, poor neighborhoods, bad educational options, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. My first black president seems to think he can have black cool without black burden. For all of his intimacies with his white mother and white grandparents, my first black president doesn’t appear to know his whites.

There’s no other way to explain Obama’s inability to imagine that this nation could elect Donald Trump. Those of us who know our whites know one thing above all else: Whiteness defends itself. Against change, against progress, against hope, against black dignity, against black lives, against reason, against truth, against facts, against native claims, against its own laws and customs. Even after Donald Trump was elected, Obama told Coates that all was not lost. He is still hopeful about the soul of white America. He said nothing about the soul of black America. That is where my hope resides. It is where my faith has always resided.

The anger that David Axelrod says was so a part of Harold Washington and that Barack Obama wonderfully did not have is also the hope that defends against America’s worst impulses. To think Obama is commended for not being angry, for not having the fortitude of deep knowledge about how white identity politics sustains and circumscribes black lives, is enough to make me cry.

I’ll remember my first black president, my black first family, for these contradictions and these disappointments. The joy of seeing Michelle cannot be separated from the pain of wondering if Barack could see me. All of that black cool on display at the White House, the black cool that will surely be enshrined in the history books, doesn’t change this fact. My president was black and I still am.

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IAN ALLEN

Obama's Faith in White America Was Not Misplaced

Donald Trump's rise, and Hillary Clinton's loss, is not a sign that America is irredeemably bigoted.

DANIEL FOSTER | DEC 30, 2016

I deeply dislike the man whose victory may vacate—who in some sense already has vacated—Barack Obama's legacy. I dislike that man as much as I can dislike anyone I never have and never will meet, and I condemn a great deal of what his partisans imagine he stands for.

But I have never hated President Obama. Not even a little. I found him frustrating and wrongheaded. And of course I wanted him to lose, twice. But I never doubted his basic honor, nor failed to appreciate the import of the very fact of his presidency. I watched—is there such a thing as begrudging awe?—the jubilee in Chicago in 2008. I retweeted tiny Virginia McLaurin, born 10 years before the passage of the 19th Amendment and 45 years before *Brown vs. Board*, dancing with the Obamas in the Blue Room. The breath caught in my throat when the little boy asked if he could touch the president's hair.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's president was black. So was mine.

But if even I, the abominable, shared the odd moment of wonder with Coates during Obama's presidency, I also glumly share his pessimism at its end. Because, for all the joy he invests in the personages of the Obamas, Coates's essay is an autopsy. Obamaism is dead, Coates argues, because Obama bought into America's founding myths instead of dismantling them, because he cut unapologetic celebrations of blackness with genuflections to respectability politics, because he offered white America a vision that "reinforce[d] the majoritarian dream" by erasing "the nightmare endured by the minority."

Coates allows that Obama, who had "the luxury of becoming black with minimal trauma," came to his views authentically. Indeed, the "hybridity" of Obama's biography, his trust in and comfort amid white America, his sincere embrace of its republican assumptions, his basic optimism all placed him in "the only tradition in existence that could have possibly put a black person in the White House." But the price of victory was that, in crucial moments, the president was blinkered by that tradition, and so could not glimpse the essential, post-liberal, reparative politics that lay beyond it.

This story, told under many glosses in Coates's work, is positively Sophoclean in its gray determinism: False consciousness enmeshes black bodies in an evil order that in turn foreordains their failure. And Coates offers an added helping of the dialectical with his casual assurance that Obama's victories somehow necessitated Donald Trump's. That 2016 wasn't even just a racist reaction, but a restoration—America regaining its bigoted equilibrium after a minor perturbation.

This highly stylized psychohistory of blackness and whiteness in America is at the very least unhelpful, and probably false. Likewise, Coates's appraisal of Obama's legacy seems to me both unduly Whiggish and unfair. Whiggish in that Obama never

in fact lived up to the promise of his early, ecumenical republicanism—unfair in its implication that that promise was never worth making.

By Coates's lights, it was the 2004 keynote at the Democratic National Convention that established Obama's commitment to "the literature of prospective presidents" over the literature of "the struggle"; that is, to a literature that speaks "not to gravity and reality, but to aspirations and dreams," a winsome promise of no more white America or black America, but only a United States of America. In the years that followed that address, nabobs swooned and mouthed words like "Lincolnian," progressives and Blue Dogs alike found favorable timbres in his slogans, the fabled "Obamacons" saw a way up and out of a divisive and diminished administration, and broader swaths still saw a man who might yet free Americans from their racial baggage.

But in 2016—hell, in 2010—that speech and the lore it produced seem from a bygone era, and the Obama who spoke of unity looks little like the Obama who ruled by a tenacious majoritarianism—whose great accomplishments were scaffolded by perverse exertions of executive power and the uncut goonery of Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid.

ONE CAN'T PIN HILLARY CLINTON'S LOSS SOLELY ON RACIST BLOWBACK.

In the interval, progressive politics, at its loudest, became about Twitter burns from baccalaureates, armed with half-digested critical theory and looking for scores to settle. The president himself never sank to this level, and admirably called-out left-wing small-mindedness on campus and elsewhere. But nevertheless, under Obama's watch the left disappeared up its own fundament, replacing his sober ecumenicalism with a series of diminishingly original comedians on increasingly obscure cable networks snarking to camera about unflattering images of Ted Cruz projected over their shoulders.

This self-infantilization of the left proceeded apace with the construction on the right of a kind of discursive ark, a place of refuge, fueled by an emergent Tea Party and a waxing Fox News. In due course, the id-amplifying panopticon of social media helped

produce hermetically sealed political ontologies on the left and right, completely self-sustaining and utterly irreconcilable. The politics of demonization gave way to something even worse: politics as onanism. How else to explain safe-space culture, or the Mizzou protesters who didn't want their protests covered, or the Black Lives Matter activists who deemed a meeting at the White House counterproductive to the movement, or the blunderbuss nihilism of the Republican nominee's campaign rallies.

All of this is very bad. Most of it is not proximately the Obama's fault. But even the bits of it that arguably are not the result of his excess faith in the American promise, any more than it was reverence for good old-fashioned liberal democracy that catapulted the latest inchoate plurality to victory.

It's true that there was plenty of racist opposition to Obama, and it's true that Trump has the support of many racists both brazen and shy. But one can't pin Hillary Clinton's loss solely on racist blowback. Electoral landslides are easy to account for, squeakers are overdetermined. The nature of Trump's win was so narrow, and his path to it so bizarre, that there is an infinite supply of counterfactuals that credibly explain it. It seems to me, then, trivially true that if there were fewer racists in America, Hillary Clinton would have won. Just as it seems trivially true that she'd have one if she'd used a State Department email server, or advocated a pro-coal energy policy, or visited Wisconsin and Michigan a dozen times more each.

But it also seems plausible that most of the white people who voted for both Obama and his successor, and whom Coates counts among the "badge holders" of white privilege, don't imagine themselves privileged. That they don't know what "white innocence" is or could possibly mean. That Hillary Clinton's loss is not a sign that America is irredeemably bigoted.

In an elegant bit of rhetoric, Coates argues that Obama had to be exceptional to win, while all Trump needed was "white bluster." But he'll no doubt be aware that, by curriculum vitae, candidate Obama was not exceptional in 2008, a fact pointed out by both John McCain and Hillary Clinton. What's more, all of the pathologies that led, by Coates's account, to the rejection of Obamaism, were as present in 2012 as in 2016. And in 2012 voters were even presented with an alternative to Obamaism in Mitt Romney, a man white in all ways, who, as his opponents would have it, even hated women and minorities if you applied enough brute hermeneutic force to his rhetoric. If white America's original sin remains uncleansed, if Obama were really such an aberrance, how strange it is that America rejected him only when he stopped appearing on the ballot?

The racism Coates sees in America is constitutive, metaphysical. He's quick to assign collective intentionality to white people, to spot white supremacy across individuals and contexts and epochs, to practice rhetorically the same agency-stripping essentialism that got us here in the first place. White supremacy is both the great evil at the heart of the American order and inseverable from it. Cut it off and you lose the patient. Coates's charge is that Obama had to ignore this to govern. And on that score he is absolutely correct. If America's racial agony is coded into our alleles, there is very little to be done about it within the 10-year budget window.

But in place of Coates's imagined sea-to-shining-sea conspiracy, I'd posit something a bit more parsimonious. That while injustices accrue systemically, caring about them has to be done individually. Plenty of Americans, brown and white, care plenty of the time. They care when confronted with video of Walter Scott's murder or toddlers' lifeless corpses in Aleppo. They care about tsunamis in countries they can't place on maps, and they cared on Edmund Pettus Bridge when caring meant skin in the game. But they care in fits and starts, when they can spare the psychic energy. When their kids are fed and their own anxieties subdued. This is how it has always been and how it will always be. There's nothing criminally white or indelibly American about the localism of our hearts or the limits of their capacity for grief, even if this feature leaves some dreams unduly deferred.

This localism is woven into the fabric of our republican order. It endows us with structures that allow individuals to freely pursue rival conceptions of the good, structures that imagine their equality before law, abstracted from the accidents of their birth. If that imagining slows the achievement of some restitutive justices—however long-withheld or well-deserved—that a more nakedly sectarian politics would otherwise hasten, then it falls on all of us to take a basic stand on whether that baby is worth the bath water. Despite our legion of disagreements, I never doubted the president's position on this matter.

Coates opens with F. Scott Fitzgerald, so I'll close with him. This, from an obscure and otherwise mediocre short story called "The Swimmers," is one of my favorite things anyone has ever written, and I'll use just about any excuse to repeat it in print:

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter - it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.

I think of that famous picture of Jesse Owens at the Olympic podium in Berlin, standing under a laurel crown above a couple of fascists, right hand raised in a defiant salute to a country as keen to string him up as raise him up.

If America furnished some of the uncomfortable contradictions in this picture of Owens, did it not also furnish his willing heart? 

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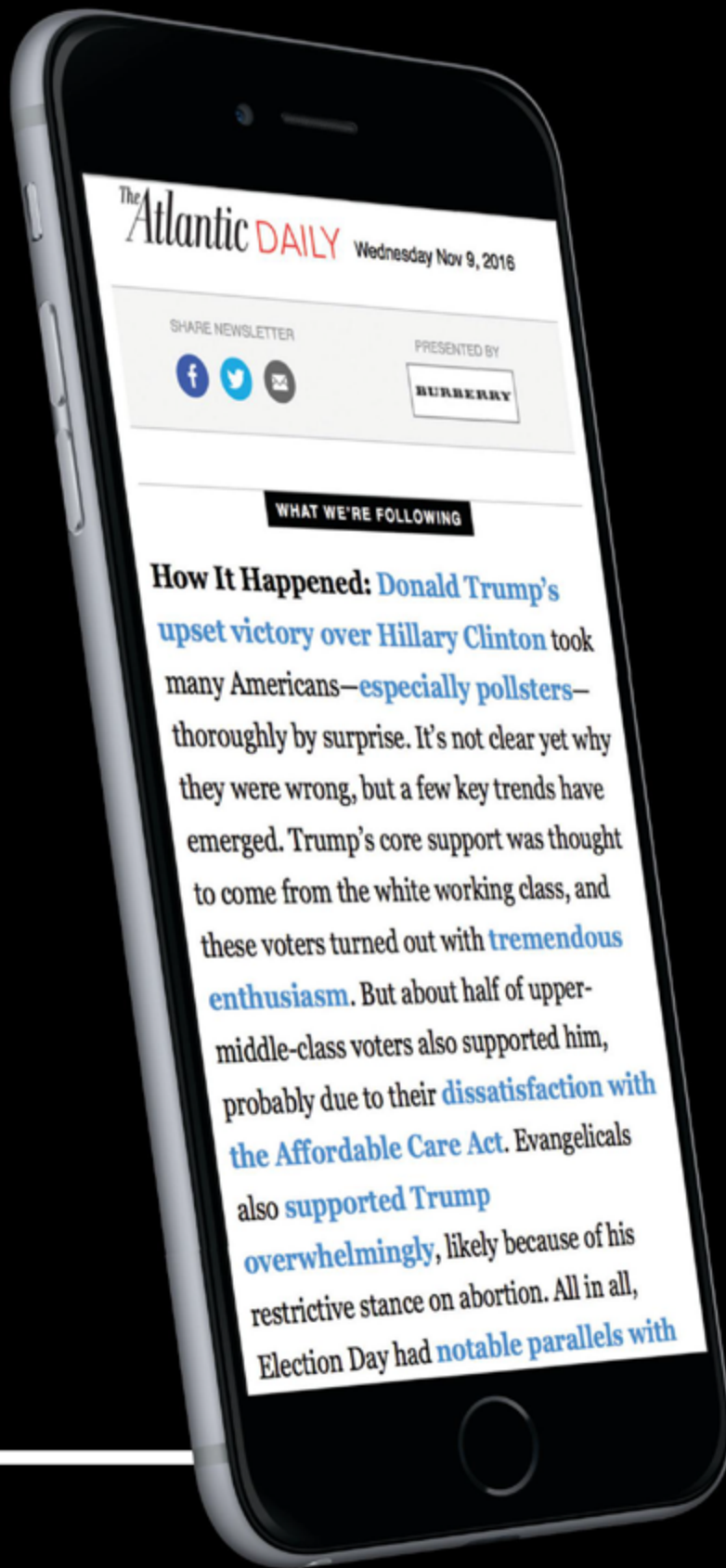


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