

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

REGGIE LOVE INTERVIEW  
*OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Reggie Love**  
**January 15, 2018**  
**Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 38 minutes and 25 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Reggie Love interview, take one, marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Reggie Love

## **Meeting Obama**

01:00:12:03

REGGIE LOVE:

The first time I met Barack Obama, it was December of 2005. We were—I started in the Hart building in the US Senate and he was coming out of votes from the senate floor, and we met in a little room off the senate floor and I—the reason why I was meeting with him was because I was interviewing to work on his senate staff as a staff assistant. And—and I remember that meeting being — me being very unimpressive. I felt like I didn't have any of the answers to the questions that he asked me, and it was not the first time

that I felt like that throughout the relationship, so I said enough for him to at least still hire me.

### **Working on Obama's team**

01:01:07:03

REGGIE LOVE:

The job for me in the beginning as a junior staffer — and technically I was a staff assistant — I was part of a team supporting all the more senior people. So, constituent services, answering the phones, answering mail, taking people on tours, and then also you had a team of legislative correspondents and legislative assistants who needed help as they were doing research for responses that they were putting out on legislative issues. Sometimes you'd get lucky and get to go sit in some of the committee meetings that Senator Obama was on. I remember the first time I sat taking notes for Nick Bauer in a foreign relations committee. The real thing that I got a chance to do when I first worked for Senator Obama, I think it was like the first point in which technology was a differentiator in terms of how we tried to provide constituent services to the people, and there was a big pile up of old mail that had gotten put into the wrong room and we'd come across it, several thousand pieces of mail. And Pete Rouse, who was the Chief of his Staff at the time said to me, he said, "Look, we need help. We got a problem in the mail room, can you help fix this thing?" And during that time, we were the first office to figure out how to digitize their mail process. And so we were able to turn around a very large backorder of unopened mail, and turned it

around in record time and I think at that point in time people kind of—I think Pete said to me, you know, I think he figured out I wasn't a total idiot.

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I became his personal aid shortly after he announced. So I worked for him in the senate office and his PAC at the time, his political action committee called the Hope Fund. I worked those two places for roughly six months each, and then when he announced his run for presidency, I kind of felt a little lost because I was 22 at the time. I never worked on a national campaign, I felt like there were a lot of people in the Obama world that worked for Kerry and they kinda knew what they wanted to do. And I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do, and so I went to Pete Rouse and I said, "Pete, you know, what do you think that I would be good doing?" And he said, "Ya know, why don't you go out on the road and take care of stuff?" He didn't call it a body guy, he didn't say you were gonna be on the road 29 days a month, he didn't say you're not going to sleep for many, many, many, many, many months, but said, "Go and just handle stuff and try to make things easier for the candidate." And so that's what I did. And you know, and look, it was definitely something that I'd never done before. I made a lot of mistakes. I always joked that even though I made a lot of mistakes, I never made the same mistake twice. I think I left a suit jacket in New Hampshire, his briefcase the day before the first debate in a car in Florida, you know, trying to find meals in random towns that aren't deep fried, smothered, covered in ranch and bleu cheese and batter. By the end of it, I think I kinda

got the hang of it and didn't get fired. Though I thought I came pretty close a couple times.

### **Obama's reaction to mistakes**

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REGGIE LOVE:

Never like blew up at you, but you knew when he was really, really upset. You probably got a little more silence than you did, you know, amped up sort of temperament. And I think there was one time when he said, "Look, if you're not up for the job, I'm sure I can find someone else who can do it." And I think that's probably—that was the high end of you know, being scolded.

### **The responsibilities of Obama's 'body man'**

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REGGIE LOVE:

My responsibilities changed and evolved over the years. So, when the campaign first started, we had a limited infrastructure, so, I mean, I did everything from, you know, getting the briefings, printing them the day before, finding a place for him to grab three meals a day. Organizing call time, finding the time for him to call his wife and his kids. I would figure out where he's gonna go to get a workout in the morning. If he wanted to organize a game of basketball, finding six guys or ten guys to play with. If someone needed time for him, from him on staff, finding the best time and

moments of the day to coordinate those conversations or phone calls. If he was going to make edits to a speech, making sure all his edits were properly added to any talking points he was going to deliver. I think by the time he won the presidency and got to the White House, you know, I — basically there was a lot of additional support. So, made the job — still similar responsibilities, but a lot more hands to help organize.

### **Working closely with Obama**

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REGGIE LOVE:

I can't speak to what everyone's perspective is or was of Barack Obama. But I will say that my perspective of him, probably the most impressive portion of it is that his demeanor and his humbleness and his calm and his mission and his purpose has always been the same. I don't think that him becoming President changed what he believed in and how he wanted to affect change and you know, try to make things a little bit better for the American people. I think he always cared more about doing the thing that was right than he ever cared about being a politician. We used to find real people; we called them real people because you'd find folks that are local and we'd set up round table discussions for them, and he would have dialogues with people in Iowa and New Hampshire and South Carolina and say, alright well, you know, we're going to talk about healthcare, we're going to talk about the economy or your job or what are the challenges you face as an Iowan or someone from Des Moines. And I remember the first time of many in which a young woman who was a single mother who was trying to get her degree

and raise her kids had car problems, and he wrote her—he had me call his accountant, get an anonymous check to send to this woman so that she could get her car fixed. And some people would say, this is like kind of the perfect thing or story that makes you seem human and connects you with Iowans and for him, he said, “Look, you know, I want this woman to be hopeful, I want her to have a chance.

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I want her to be able to do the things she wants to do to provide for her family and to better further her own education.” And it was more about that than it was about how do I look and how do I appear. And especially in this culture today and where there’s so much media and there’s so much scrutiny and trying to understand your brand and understanding your message all the time, you can—it can be—it can be daunting, and for him to say like, look, you know, I want to be president because I think I can make a difference versus I think I want to be president because I should be president never changed for him. And I don’t know if that theme was always sort of seen because you know, he was on this trajectory and you know, you win the nomination and you’re a rock star and you give this great speech at the DNC. And sometimes the flair might have betrayed him as someone who was above what it meant to know what it’s like to chase the American dream, but I know that he always stayed near to it and, you know, I think it was something that he always worked at. And I think the other thing too, which I think people get about him, the guy always wanted to be a great father and a great husband. I had a lot of respect and admiration for how even though, as he was running for president or as president, he always put

those things right up there with the same level of priority and—and I think that’s not always easy to do. And even—not even—even when you’re not president, even when you’re just, you know, you run a company or you run a bank or you run, you know, a tech company and there are all of these demands all the time. And to be able to be cognizant of that and to make sure you’re being a provider and a teacher and a father and a parent and a husband along the way I think is, you know, one of the things I have a huge amount of admiration for and when I get to that stage in my life I hope that I’ll be able to you know, follow in those types of footsteps.

***Dreams from My Father***

01:11:36:16

REGGIE LOVE:

I mean, I learned a lot about him from reading the book. I think the things that I identified with from *Dreams of My Father* was really his struggle with race and identity. You know, and, I don’t think I struggle with my own race and identity the way that he did because obviously, you know, he grew up with, you know, Caucasian mother, African father. I kind of had that experience; I went to, you know, a great independent school in North Carolina. You know, you had 130 kids in a class, or I think actually my graduating class had 90 kids, and maybe you had—you were 10 or 15% of diversity. And you know, you go to Duke and you know, it’s a diverse place but you—you know, it’s not—it was not the ecosystem that I was used to growing up to in Charlotte, where as a kid you know, I kind of you know, kind of grew up in a middle class house with you know, and lived in a middle

class neighborhood and then you kind of were thrown into these high end high schools and universities and less diversity, less socio-economic diversity. I was struggling to figure out where I fit in and you know, and as people, I think—as people the most important thing is your identity, and a lot of your identity is based on your tribe. And sometimes your tribes change throughout your life, and sometimes you're in one tribe your entire life, and sometimes you only have one or two changes.

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And I struggled with this concept of how do I stay connected with this one group of friends who are different and live in a different part of town and are different socio-economics and this other group of friends who I spend all my time with every day in school and you know, I know them both very intimately, but those two worlds don't often come together. And I think that's—it's hard, right? Because when you are connected to two different ecosystems, but neither one of them kind of know your other ecosystem, both ecosystems kind of frown upon one another and oftentimes frown upon you for not being with them all the time. I didn't even know I was struggling with it until I read the book and I was like, oh my God, this is—sounds exactly like what I just went to—went through for the last five years. And so it was inspiring to me because knowing that someone else shared a perspective and was thoughtful enough to communicate it in a way that other people could digest it—digest it and learn from it really showed me that this person is much more intelligent and has much more EQ than you could ever imagine. He was able to write something ten years ago that I didn't even know that I was even going through. And so to be in touch and to



be aware and alert of not just yourself but of your community and your environment and how things like make you feel, and even if those things that are having an impact on you, even if those things aren't necessarily directed specifically to you. And so probably one of the best traits that I learned about him and I like to believe has given me a greater perspective to be a little bit more emotionally intelligent about how I feel and how other people may feel through my interactions with them and through their interactions with culture and society. And I think that that is how you're able to really the fundamental way of how you bring people together, through having that ability to have that emotional intelligence. And not to say I understand, because sometimes we don't always understand something because we never experienced it the way someone else has experienced it. But to say you know, look, I really am listening to you and I hear you, and I may not know it from my own experience, but I have got to learn about it from you and from your perspective and from other perspectives and not just through the lens that we see ourselves.

**Blackness**

01:16:47:06

REGGIE LOVE:

Yeah. Look, I remember some of these points in time where you had some people who said that you know, look, you haven't spent enough time in New York in the Bronx and in Harlem or you haven't been to these churches, or you know, we don't know you the way we knew Bill Clinton. You know, there are a whole host of things that made a certain group of people kind of

have these accusations. But I think his response always — and I, ya know, wholeheartedly agreed with it — was that, you know, if a guy named Barack Hussein Obama can become the Democratic nominee, can become the President of the United States, that in itself will take the glass roof or glass ceiling off the lid for so many brown and beige kids across the world, and it would genuinely show that anything's possible. He always would say that in a culture where you have such levels of income inequality and wealth inequality, when you are focused on trying to come up with policies to raise the minimum floor of the social contract — education, social security, healthcare, all of these things — those in themselves are policies to help all people who are disadvantaged. And when you look at the statistics of how the parity, or disparity, between race and income, those types of programs inherently have a higher impact on people who are brown, black, immigrants. And so, I think that everyone probably didn't—doesn't truly understand that as a whole, but I do believe that—I do believe that his mission always stood there and I think those things had a lasting impact on you know, on a lot of people who were brown.

**Racism during Obama's presidential campaign**

01:19:25:07

REGGIE LOVE:

The atmosphere around race in the US in 2008 during the first campaign, 2008, 2007 — look, it was intense. I can remember towns where we'd be in fundraisers—we'd be going to a fundraiser in Texas or Oklahoma, and you drive through a neighborhood and you have people standing outside on

their lawns like you know, giving you the middle finger. The country—it's a big country, you know. And if you go back and you look at the numbers, more people on a percentage basis of eligible voters voted in the 2008 election than we've had in the history of our country. I think when you look at statistics like that, I think it shows that the population of people who are fearful and still have these pent up anxieties and fears around race or gender or sexuality, I think that population is—is not as big as we—as it appears to be. I think they're very loud, I think they make a lot of noise, I think they're very active and they vote at a higher percentage rate, but when I look at this country, you know, I don't really have an issue with our trajectory. You know, I think we are not perfect on race. The president understands that we've not been perfect on race through the history of our country. But when you look at the different iterations we've gone through from where we start—where we started as a country and where we are today and where we think we can be, I think you can only be hopeful. I think there are blips in history that are not necessarily the best for the country, but I think we often recognize it over time and it's usually through the political process, it's through activism, through engagement, through organizing, through messaging and talking about these things. What is the best for the American people, what is the right thing to do. Our country has the ability to be resilient. *Audacity of Hope*, Obama's second book, he—there's a section on the constitution where he goes into this, and explains why our country is such a great country and, you know, even though race and gender and sexuality have been issues of contention from day one of the

Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, we've, you know, worked over the years to figure out how to be a little bit better.

**Reverend Jeremiah Wright**

01:22:40:17

REGGIE LOVE:

When the tapes came out of some of the sermons that Reverend Wright, who was President Obama's pastor in Chicago for many years, there was an up swell of attention around President Obama's relationship with Reverend Wright and those comments that Reverend Wright had made. I think people were worried internally within the campaign and I'm sure others who you talk to will remember this time very vividly. I think it was probably one of the more pivotal points throughout the campaign because something that appeared to be, you know, a potential weapon against us was actually turned around and used as a way to talk about an issue around race and culture in the United States in a way we had not talked about at a national level. I think the biggest question was, you know, were we ready to have that conversation? And it's such an interesting question, right? Is the country ready? And I think the president would always say that you know, it's always the perfect time to do the right thing. And I think when I look back at his presidency, I can see his evolution around when you think about his religious code that he sort of had and grew up with and especially when I remember at the beginning of the campaign, you know, he always looked at—I think an issue was around same sex marriage. Is it a states issue, is it federal, is it church, is it not, and he had always said at the beginning that

the separation between church and state, and how the church wants to do it is not the same way that everyone else should do it. But fundamentally, he always felt that people who are together were partners should have whatever they need to be treated just like everyone else regardless if they're brown, man, woman, gay, straight, white, black. And I think he always stayed the course around trying to figure out how to do what was right for people, and even if we were ready for it or not ready for it — because how can you look somebody in the face and tell them that sorry, we can't do the right thing by you today. We need to wait another ten or fifteen years.

### **Obama's inauguration**

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REGGIE LOVE:

January 2009, you know, you're—everyone's inside the capitol. They're sort of calling everyone out, senators, family, vice president, wife, kids, everyone's out, and you know, before he goes out to give his—to be sworn in and to give his address at the inauguration, myself and Marvin and Barack Obama are the sort of last people back there. And it was a big issue around the temperature. It was a pretty cold day. I remember saying you know, have a little fist bump, we were like, look it's not gonna be that cold. You got this. And the energy is pretty amazing. It sends chills down my spine every time I go back and look through some of the photos that I took that day to see how inspired we were as a country, and to see, you know, to see what really the definition of progress looks like. I think for me, it was — my grandmother was the first African American woman to work for Social

Security in Charleston, South Carolina. And you know, and she had to fight for like everything she ever had. To see how her—her fight, and the fight of many, over so many years had finally culminated in such an amazing moment. As Obama always liked the quote of Dr. King, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” And so, you know, to work for two years on a campaign in which people thought at the beginning didn’t have a chance, to you know, miss birthdays and wedding and holidays to be a part of something like that you know, makes everything worth it and you know, reminds you — reminds me of how special his campaign was and how special that time was.

### **Security at Obama’s inauguration**

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REGGIE LOVE:

For me, I never really had a comparative sort of analysis of you know, it’s more dangerous now than it was for Bush or for Clinton. You know, I always kind of felt like, alright man, there’s this black guy running for President of the United States, it’s like probably pretty dangerous. So it’s like yeah, ok. You know, it never—it didn’t surprise me, and it never crossed my mind that it wasn’t like a possibility and that there were tensions around it.

### **Recreation with Obama**

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REGGIE LOVE:

I think there are a couple misconceptions out there. So, I went to the gym—we worked out during the campaign mainly because the trip director,

Marvin Nicholson, was like, “Look, you need to be in the gym with him because he can’t be late. So, if he’s in the gym, you need to be there with him.” And so I was like, “Alright, well if I’m at the gym, I might as well get a workout.” But we did have a fair amount of fun playing hoops. Basketball for Barack Obama was, you know — I think if you know, if you heard the stories, I think it’s one of the big equalizers that he talks about in terms of, ya know, you can tell a lot about people in terms of how they play the game. You know, it’s a true team sport that, you know, allows people to be a part of something, to show that they’re selfless and you know, and he’s a pretty big competitor and who doesn’t like to win, ya know. He talks a lot of trash when he wins. I do think like when you work six, seven days a week, it’s important to be able to spend a couple hours doing something to get your mind off of all the other things that are going on. You go to like a place like New Hampshire, and you play basketball with a bunch of firefighters and police officers, you know, people look at you differently, you know? People are like, oh you know, that guy’s a—he’s a pretty good player, man. I think of people that I feel like I know really well who I’ve played basketball with, ya know, from my childhood, who’ve I never had a meal with but I’m like oh yeah, yeah, I know that guy because I played you know, five or six games of hoops with him. You know, and I think the competition’s healthy. I think he loves to—I think Barack Obama loves to win, and I don’t think it matters if you’re throwing darts, spinning circles in a chair, throwing a football, the guy has a competitive spirit. I think it comes across that he does. You don’t really want to bet against Barack Obama.

***Music of the Civil Rights Era concert at the White House***

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REGGIE LOVE:

It was a powerful event, you know. And it was such a good group of talented artists today who perform such ya know, amazing pieces of work. I mean, and a lot of things that I, ya know, kind of grew up listening to in the church. If you grow up in an African American church, you know, those things are the kind of — those songs are like ingrained in you a bit. I thought it was a very — very well done, very special event, and I thought it was unique. It was a great opportunity to highlight some great culture that a lot — not everyone has had a chance to experience.

**Personal lasting impacts of Obama**

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REGGIE LOVE:

I've had some really great mentors and folks who've had an impact on my life, and I think Barack Obama is almost like a father to me. Three things that I think of often of things that I've learned from him specifically. I think that the first one is empathy. I knew the definition of empathy, but I don't think I knew what empathy was until I spent two years traveling the campaign with him. I think the first time I—it really kind of blew me away was he gets off the phone with President Bush in the Fall of 2008 in which they are trying to get the troubled asset relief program passed; and I say to him, I say, you know, "Man you are really working hard with these republicans to get this thing done. You know, I think—you think the republicans would work this



hard with you if the shoe were on the other foot?" And he's like, he goes, "I don't know the answer to it, but ultimately I'm not going to make politics of this because the thing that is going to happen then if this thing happens really badly is gonna have a huge impact on all the people who had not a lot to do with the housing crisis, and you know, people like your cousin and the mom and pop shop, they're not going to have access to credit, they're not gonna be able to payroll, people aren't going to be able to put food on the table. And even though it might make for good politics, it may increase my chances of being president, that's not something that I'm willing to do." And I thought that was actually amazing, because, you know, the guy had been working a year and a half to become President and thought it was more important to do the best thing for the people than to do the best thing for his campaign. Patience, you know, in the world of sports and, what do you call it, this digital age, everything is about like immediate gratification. And often the things that are the most bearing of fruit take a lot of work and take a lot of time and don't often have milestones in the middle that say, oh hey you're doing a good job.

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And so being patient enough to stay the course and to work and to do the thing that you know is right and the thing you know you believe in. The last thing is, you know, appreciate your parents every day because you don't know when they're going to be gone. He and I got into a little tiff because you know, he said, you know, it was the day after the inauguration and he said, "You know, the inauguration went and I didn't see your parents the entire time." And I said, "Yeah, no, they're here, they're around." And he

goes, “Well, you know, you should—you should bring them by the White House.” And my mom and I were in an argument over tickets and who and when and—and I said, you know, “Sir, I just—I can’t really deal with them right now. You know, we’ve got a lot of work to do here. It’s the first day of us being in the White House, we got all this stuff to figure out.” And he says, “Well, look, I’m the leader of the free world and I’d like to say hello to your mother and father, so you should get them here now.” And you know, so I call my mom and my dad and I’m like, “Hey guys, where you at?” And, “Can you guys come down to the White House for a minute?” And it’s still one of the most meaningful things to happen to my mom and my dad, but the point that he was making to me was that you only get your parents for a little bit of time so don’t waste it being upset over tickets. Just, you know, take the time and enjoy it with them because you don’t get it back. And I think because of his perspective and the way—how early he lost his mother, that was one of the things he always sort of drilled into me, and I hope I try to do, and I tell my mom I try to—you know, I’m not Barack Obama but I try.

**The US since Obama left office**

01:36:15:20

REGGIE LOVE:

I do believe in our political process. You know, I think that the current administration and the last presidential election I think really showed that there was a disconnect between main street, Middle America, and Wall Street. And look, I think we came out of one of the largest recessions we’d seen since the great depression. I think Donald Trump had a message that

he was able to sell that he was the person to help alleviate those economic pains. And I think an average person looking at the stock market and saying, oh man the economy must be doing great and the DOW is doing great and the NASDAQ is doing great, and you know, unemployment's low, I think there are a lot of things that were economically different from people that we just missed, and I think Donald Trump was able to-to identify that. I think when you look at individual—when you look at consumer credit, consumer credit's super, super tight after Dodd Frank and after the correction in the housing market. And so, if you had been spending 130% of your annual income, you can now only spend 115%, you feel like you have a little less money in your pocket. And I think, you know, and I think it's true; you do have a little less. Your basket of goods are smaller and you know, therefore the way things are going must not be working for me so I think we should—whatever's telling me they can fix it, I'm gonna go with them. People don't have an appreciation for social justice if it costs them money. Look, if we can have social justice and I can have the same amount of money in my pocket, I'm fine with it. I think that it's never the wrong time to do the right thing for people, but it doesn't mean everyone else feels that way.

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