

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

TA-NEHISI COATES INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Ta-Nehisi Coates
Author and Journalist
November 19, 2018
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 42 minutes and 15 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Author and Journalist

BET farewell party for Obama

01:00:14:20

TA-NEHISI COATES:

So this was throughout Barack Obama's presidency, he would have, you know, this music series in the White House, which was—I don't know if it was unprecedented but it was certainly something new, you know, in our era. And you know, it was actually pretty wide ranging. You know, when I went to do research for the article, I saw this, it wasn't like he was just inviting Black artists but I think because of the fact that Black artists had never been welcomed into the White House, that got the most attention. So like when

Common—you know, when he brought Common and that became a thing. So it was a collaboration with BET and it was Bel Biv DeVoe, De La Soul, Common, Leslie Odom's, Yolanda—it was clearly a Black music thing. Although Bradley Cooper was there. It was the wildest thing. Anyway, so—but besides Bradley Cooper, everybody was—everybody was Black. And it was a very—and people—this is at the end, you know, of Obama's presidency and people know it's the end, and there was a celebratory feeling in the air. People were making jokes, you know about which line was longer and what that meant about who had the good hair and who had the bad hair, paper bag tests and all—you know, it was like a jocular sort of, you know, feeling and very, very Black.

01:01:30:17

And I think like a lot of people just felt—to have that sort of cultural presence like at the White House was just a tremendous, tremendous marker of history. I mean, you go in there, you see like De La Soul or Bel Biv DeVoe, you know, at the White House. I mean it's a real, real thing and the Obama's are there and they're dancing and everybody's having you know, a good time, and so I think for like Black folks there, A, it was a kind of confirmation of a kind of arrival and acceptance, you know, because Black music has always been central to American history, but—in American culture but before that there was this sense that we want Black music but not Black people. And now you have Black music and Black people and they were occupying the White House. I mean I think at one point Jesse Williams was on stage and he was just making the point, you know, about all of us being the descendants of

slaves and he just looked out and he said, “and look where we are now,” you know, “look where we are.”

01:02:31:13

You know, and you could just really—you could feel it, man. It was a heavy, heavy feeling. Obama, I think, gets a lot of flak from the perspective of the presidency—first Black presidency only being symbolic, but you know, as I argue, I think people underrate the value of symbols. I think symbols are very, very important and I think the way Obama conducted himself in terms of specifically his relationship with Black culture communicated a totally different symbol to other people.

01:03:03:19

And I think one of the great mistakes of the era was we forgot that. We forgot that there were other people, you know, who were watching. I think because, you know, we felt ourselves to be accepted in the White House, we didn't understand there were other people who were gonna see that. Like, see him playing basketball for instance, you know what I mean. Or you know, see him give you know, a particular kind of handshake to Kevin Durant. And they would feel a kind of way about that, you know? And we now have pretty clear numbers that that's exactly what happened. As beautiful as that party was, and it really was. I mean it was an exceptional—I think—I actually think that's gonna—people are gonna remember that.

01:03:36:09

Like, I think it was historic, you know, to actually be there. I don't usually like those things, but I felt like—you know what I mean, this is going to be historic. I was writing about it. But I think a lot of the joy was, yeah, and this is gonna continue. You know what I mean, like he was gonna keep going. You know what I mean? Hillary Clinton wasn't Barack Obama but it was the same sort of movement and everything and if anything, what was underrated was the sheer power of revaunch, you know, and historically, redemption, you know. And I just—I don't think that was totally seen at the time.

Racial opposition towards Obama

01:04:08:02

TA-NEHISI COATES:

And one of the most shocking things, if you were Black, to watch Barack Obama run is—you know, I just want to be clear. Like, he's a Black dude. He's very clearly a Black dude, but he is the kind of Black dude that if you wanted to represent yourself to another group of people, to white people, by the standards, you know, that America says, you would say, we should send him. Ok, you wouldn't send me. You know what I mean? And you wouldn't send most of us. You just wouldn't, you know what I mean? He was the ambassador; you know what I mean, in many ways because this sort of you know, "middle class values" and you can talk about whether those are—you know, what they are and what that relationship that has to Black people.

01:04:51:15

But let's just say the values that America says upright people should possess, he seemed to possess them. Well educated, you know, articulate as they so often said. You know, had a wife who he seemed to, you know, love and adore. Two beautiful, you know, children. I mean, this was Black Camelot. Dog named Bo. I mean, you know, what—how—how much more, you know, American could we get than this? And to see the response so very often be, from jump in fact, he ain't American, he's Kenyan. You know, the idea that Obama's gonna take from white people and give to you know, Black people. Like this was the discourse very, very early on. Again, I think we underrated the power of it and how much of it, you know, was actually there.

01:05:44:08

But there was clearly a significant swath of this country that there was no one who would be an amba—like there was like—the idea of an ambassador was ridiculous because these people are at war with you, period. You know? There's no Black person who would represent you who would be acceptable to them. That's, you know, largely the import for me. You know, there was a percentage. There was nothing Obama could do to be respectable to people who love Donald Trump. There just wasn't. There was no way, you know. And I don't know if he himself actually got that or even gets it, you know, at this point.

Obama's Black identity

01:06:23:03

TA-NEHISI COATES:

If you think about like Black experiences and, you know, plural, I think there are two that predominate and that is you know, the experience of coming out of the south, you know, and dealing with the kind of, you know, direct and often, you know, brutally violent, you know, and in your face, you know, sort of racism. And then there's you know, the Black experience that you know, is related to that. You know, most often for those of us who came, you know, whose relatives came from the south, you know, in the north, the grinding sort of poverty of the cities, the kind of racism that's, you know, writ in the policies segregates us for instance, you know, to public housing.

01:06:59:11

Like my mom lived in, you know, public housing. That's sort of like the story of my lineage. My dad, you know, from Philadelphia living in that, you know, sort of grinding poverty. Those are you know; I think the two, you know, stories that we see in terms of most Black politicians I would say for the most part. And then you have you know, certain people who maybe who grew up you know because of class reasons maybe did not have to directly deal with that even though in those cases, they aren't really that far from it. I mean, Barack Obama was from Hawaii. And that's not to say that Hawaii is a racial utopia, you know, a non-racist utopia. That's not what I'm saying. But the very geography is different. Black people are not just a minority; they are a significant minority there.

01:07:42:09

The entire notions and assumptions that you—you know, you see on the mainland, while they may be diffused and you know, it may be some of that there, it's just not—it's not as prevalent, it's not the same, you know, sort of thing. So the first thing was to be there. And here's another level of it, 'cause that's not enough. You know what I mean? Like, you could be there, and you could have white parents or white grandparents or whatever who don't actually love you and communicate their racism to you and so while he does describe certain instances where it was there for his grandparents, it's really no doubt that they loved him and accepted him.

01:08:17:05

And then the third level was his mom who was white was very clear that you are Black, you know what I mean? Like, there's—so he never had the—I think in addition to that, he never had the um... in a major way like any sort of schizophrenia about what he was because his mom was really, really clear with him about that and you know, bought him books and you know, took him to see things. So even if it was not communicated to him in a way that it was to say, you know, me and most Black people, it's just in the air, it's what you are, you know what I mean, there's no intellectual—it was there for him. And I think that is highly, highly unusual. There are a lot of Black people throughout history who are biracial, who had white parents.

01:08:59:13

That's not particularly uncommon. I think that gets overrated when people talk about his experience. You know, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, we have a long history of, you know, Black people who have

white parents. That's not really what it is. It's that plus those other things that make it just fundamentally, you know, different.

Obama's relationship to Black culture

01:09:23:03

TA-NEHISI COATES:

So Barack Obama is living, you know, in Hawaii and he—a large part of like how he's seeing Blackness is not just, you know, in the things his mother, you know, is giving him but it's also you know, through the television. So he's watching basketball and it's Dr. J. That's Blackness. Dr. J is Blackness. You know, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, this is Blackness to him. You know, Michael Jackson, Jackson Five, you know, this is Blackness to him because he's seeing it you know what I mean, mostly through the lens of pop culture. And then you know, he tells the story in his book of going to a basketball game for his—with his dad.

01:10:00:20

He's looking at basketball and he's looking at not just, you know, the fact of basketball but how these Black players that are on the court actually play basketball and how they you know, look and you know, the culture that they brought with them, you know, from the mainland. Culturally, like he's you know, in love like right away. You know, and I actually think a lot of his success was his ability to communicate that love to Black people even if he didn't do it the way someone who was raised in it would do it. You never

doubted that he loved the culture, you know, and I think like that goes back to you know, his childhood.

The practice of reclaiming identity in the Black community

01:10:46:22

TA-NEHISI COATES:

I would say that it probably emerges from a more dire need. You feel yourself and so much of your identity to be constructed by people who hate you. You think about like Frederick Douglass, you know, born Frederick Bailey, you know, recreating himself. Malcolm Little, you know, becoming Malcolm X. You know, myself, my own name, you know, is this attempt you know, for Black folks to sort of reclaim, you know, some sort of identity and it was a strong, you know, who am I? Who am I? What am I? You know? Even these names that people think of as you know, sort of ghetto or Black names, I mean it's actually an attempt to claim. In his book, Barack Obama says, "You can't call me—don't call me Barry anymore." That's familiar, that's familiar. I mean, the decision to say, I am Barack. You know what I mean? Which is very different than I—you know, not to ya know, cast despairings on anyone but immigrant groups that come here all the time that want to integrate actually do the inverse, you know, assume these very American names and in fact, he said, "No, I'm Barack." You know, he leaned into you know, what one would consider the most alien aspect of him. That is not unfamiliar I think to Black people.

Obama's birth certificate

01:11:59:06

TA-NEHISI COATES:

You know, what is interesting, when Obama was forced to show his birth certificate, I don't know if he was humiliated, but I think a lot of us were. My sense is a lot of this stuff just rolls off his shoulders, but again and maybe this goes back to this whole issue of how one comes to Blackness but for a lot of us, you know, there are echoes of that all throughout our history of needing to prove, you know, who you are. When I first came to some degree of prominence as a writer, there was this whole thing, you know, in terms of how people who would read me and then they would hear me talk and they would be like, is this the same person? You know what I mean, you can't actually be the same person and I think for a lot of us as Black folks, there's this constant doubting, you know, this constant thing of—and people use all sorts of reason to justify—use affirmative action to justify but before affirmative action, it was the same, it was just constant you know, sort of thing of no, that's really not you.

01:12:59:08

You know what I mean? You really didn't do that. You know, again, you know, Frederick Douglass, when he publishes his narrative, it's like, no, didn't no slave write that. There's no way a slave, you know, wrote that. The birth certificate was this culmination of these repeated acts of kind of disbelief,

you know, from people arguing that actually, you know, Bill Ayers wrote *Dreams From My Father*, there's no way Barack Obama was smart enough to write *Dreams From My Father*. You know, these are the sorts of things that you just know would not, you know, happen to say, Bill Clinton. Like no one, you know, if Bill Clinton had written a book, no one would say Bill Clinton didn't write that.

01:13:37:08

You know, but once again I think for a lot of us it's very, very familiar, you know, and had echoes within our history. And so this notion that, you know, here you are president of the United States; listen, it don't get no higher than that, and even as president of the United States, they look at you like that's not really you.

Joe Biden's description of Obama

01:13:58:06

TA-NEHISI COATES:

Uh, I was sympathetic to Joe Biden. I think a lot of us wouldn't have said it like that. I think what gets under—under—underappreciated is within the Black community, there was great frustration with our representatives, and this is not really that talked about, you know, because you're in a larger fight, but... I thought Barack was clean, that was how I thought about him. too. You know, like the thing about it was, I was like, listen man, I will have, you know, one disagreement with Barack Obama up one side and down the other, he's

never gonna embarrass me. He's my ambassador; my ambassador would never embarrass me. He's not, you know, gonna get caught with a 21-year-old White House intern. That's—that will never happen.

01:14:48:12

I mean, people forget like what like the popular images of Black people were, and the mindset. Listen, I love hip-hop. I love rap, you know what I mean. That's the music I grew up on. But the idea of like rappers and basketball players. You know, I love basketball. I love LeBron, there's no disrespect to these guys. But the idea that that was the range in which Black men existed in the pop culture for the most part. That was it. And so it was really something beautiful about, you know, seeing for those eight years something else, you know. Now it shouldn't be all that either. You know what I mean, but it was good to see something different, something clean as Joe Biden said. You know—now, you know, our inference from it is a little different, but I understood man, I understood. And you know what, he wasn't even just clean as it turned out for us. He was clean personally for a politician, you know. And I want to be clear, I separate that from his you know, policies, which you know, folks can have, you know, all sorts of arguments about, you know, and legit ones. But as a symbol and representative, it was good to see.

Racial opposition towards Obama

01:16:00:04

TA-NEHISI COATES:

I think one of the things that happens is people often ask, you know, they wave back and forth, how much of you know, the immediate opposition to Obama and the—you know, opposition—how much was it race and how much was it something else and one of the answers that you often get is, “Well it wasn’t just race.” To the extent that it was race at all, it’s always wrong though. It’s always wrong. I don’t care if it was 10% or 5%. It was always wrong. And with him it was not 10 or 5%. The way to understand this is, this does not require a Mitch McConnell or John Boehner or Paul Ryan to be personally racist.

01:16:34:02

That’s not really the question—or be bad people or bigots or whatever, however you want—that’s not the actual question. The question is structural. What is the Republican Party right now? What was the Republican Party when Barack Obama entered the office in 2008? It was the white party. In the south there were whole regions where literally, you know, the difference between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party was that the Democratic Party had larger numbers of Black representatives and, you know, some white representatives and the Republican Party basically was, you know, white. And that’s generally true even today. If that’s your base, if your base is white, period.

01:17:13:11

In terms of your national politics you have Nixon, you know, who runs on, you know, law and order, the southern strategy, all sorts of dirty tricks that had you know, things that had to do with race. You have Reagan who launches his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi. You have George Herbert

Walker Bush who has the Willie Horton campaign; you have George W. Bush's—George W. Bush whose campaign—when he was campaigning against John McCain, campaign spread this rumor that John McCain had this Black daughter. Those are your presidents in the modern era. You know, the ones—ones who won. So you're building on—and that's to say nothing of all the things that are happening at the state level, the government—that's the party.

01:17:55:21

How can you have your first Black president and race or racism be no factor? It's ridiculous. There was no other way for this to possibly be. The question is not, you know, are these bad people? Are these people individually racist? It is that the structure of the Republican Party right now, and again we have plenty of evidence it is built, you know, almost entirely on white people. It is a white party. There's no way for that not to be racist.

01:18:27:19

The other thing is you have to look at the rhetoric that people employed. Newt Gingrich called Barack Obama a food stamp president. I mean, this guy's running for president in 2012, calls Barack Obama a food stamp president. John Boehner says, "This guy has never held a real job in his life." This was the actual—and you know, this is at the top. When that's the rhetoric, I mean what—what is the base, you know what I mean, actually thinking?

01:18:56:03

People—you know, the news outlets—Fox News, you know, the propaganda outlet, you know, in Obama's America, you know, Rush Limbaugh, in Obama's

America, you know, Black kids, you know, beat up on white kids. This—you know, hyping up by Meghan Kelly of the New Black Panther Party as some sort of grave threat. You know, the way voter fraud and this notion of voter fraud suddenly gains strength, you know, in the Obama era. Bill O'Reilly after you know, 2012 when Obama wins, saying, you know, this is not the country for white people anymore, these other people want stuff. You know, it was all there. The toleration of Donald Trump, you know.

01:19:30:21

A lot of people right now think of this notion that Trump is some sort of break from history or different, but people forget, the Republican party tolerated him the whole time, tolerated his campaign, laughed about birtherism the whole time. You had a situation where half the Republican Party at any point, anywhere from 40%, half the Republican Party believed Barack Obama was not a citizen. I mean, I don't know how that's non-ra—I don't know of the non-racist explanation for that, you know. You would have to be blind, and I think in many ways this, in fact, played into the narrowing of what the conversation could actually be. Because if half the opposition party don't believe you're legitimate from the beginning, if they have a history of nominating presidents who are not above, you know, using race and racism in order to win, what can you do?

01:20:27:08

I mean, what—what possible grounds for talking can there be? And I think actually this—the fact of the racism piece bled into everything else. It became bigger than that. It wasn't just about Trayvon Martin; it wasn't just about Henry Louis Gates. It was about your ability, for instance, when you find

evidence that Russia is, you know, messing with the elections, to actually go to the opposition and say, “Hey Listen, we need to like come together and make some sort of statement.” Well, why would they come together with you when half the base doesn’t believe you’re a legitimate president?

01:21:04:04

If half of ‘em believe you’re a Muslim born in Kenya, and they—this is a democracy, they represent these people, how are you guys gonna actually come together to do anything in the first place? Why would they give you a hearing on Merrick Garland when half their base doesn’t believe you’re a legitimate president, you know? It tainted everything. It was everywhere.

Henry Louis “Skip” Gates Jr. and Trayvon Martin

01:21:30:07

TA-NEHISI COATES:

What with the Skip Ga—Gates arrest showed was you basically couldn’t speak common sense. One would generally agree that for a police officer to arrest... an old man, let’s say, in his home is wrong. Like that-- that probably is not what we want. Like, you’re not preventing any crime by doing that. Like, that’s not an intelligent act of crime prevention. Barack Obama says the officer acted stupidly, which is again the most mild as possible thing that you could say, I mean I could tell you some other things, but the most mild as possible thing you could say and for a week it just envelops everything.

01:22:14:17

So I think what that made clear to them, we gotta be really, really careful about what we say, like we can't even say basic things. There's no room to say basic things. It was the very fact that Obama said something that "made it worse". So if you look at like the statements, for instance, by Republicans when Trayvon Martin first gets killed, and, you know, there's a lot of call for unity and sympathy, the moment Barack Obama says, "You know, if I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." Everything switches. Everything immediately switches. I think that really narrowed the ability to talk and what you could talk about.

Black criticism of Obama

01:22:57:05

TA-NEHISI COATES:

I think the thing you have to contrast; you know, against say Cornel West's criticism, Tavis Smiley's criticism, even my own criticism, is Obama among Black people is the most popular person ever. I mean, like he was like—I can remember when he was running in '08 and I was living in Harlem at the time and like the t-shirt stands and the vendors man, and all of the like, t-shirts they had with Barack Obama's face and all the posters they had with his face, Black people loved this dude. Like, they still do. Like, to a level that is just like that I've never actually like in my lifetime seen before. They feel so well represented and so I actually made it very difficult to criticize him, I would say.

01:23:39:15

Those of us, you know, who, you know, sort of lodged those criticisms, I don't think it dinged him one bit. I will give him credit. You know, in the time I interviewed him, he—he heard out, you know, what I had to say. You know, several times he invited me down to the White House for those little press scrums that they would have and he would hear out what I had to say and he was very eager to engage.

01:24:00:06

But I think that was more intellectual. I don't think in terms of actual, you know what I mean, politics, we had anywhere near the effect that say birtherism, you know, had. We didn't—well, I'll speak for myself. I didn't want to, not like that. I don't—I don't—I know I never perceived my criticisms as a threat, you know.

Joining press meeting with Obama

01:24:22:10

TA-NEHISI COATES:

So first one like he sat here, I sat—he sat me right next to him, right. And I feel like I wasn't like as aggressive as I should've been as a journalist, right. And he was not playing, like he went right at me. He just—he was ready to argue and ready to fight about whatever. Not like disrespectful, not rude, but the way you want to debate with somebody and negate somebody in a debate.

01:24:41:13

Um. So the second time I came down and I just—I had been talking to my wife and my wife—you know, I told her, I said, “Listen, I didn’t feel like I did my job. I wasn’t who I wanted to be. I wasn’t as aggressive. I didn’t—I had never been like in the White House. I didn’t know how you were supposed to deal with these folks, right. And my wife said, “Remember how James Baldwin dealt with Bobby Kennedy.” It’s this famous meeting in Harlem and Bobby K—where Bobby Kennedy comes to meet with these activists and writers and they just give Bobby Kennedy. “So you remember that, remember that, that’s where you’re supposed to be.”

01:25:12:21

So I went down there and I’m getting myself hyped up because, you know, it’s actually quite easy to confront people who you think are irredeemable. It’s not hard to confront Donald Trump; do you understand what I’m saying? But people who are a little more complicated, who you actually kind of love but you feel like are wrong about certain—it’s hard. And he had given these—you know, he was giving these series of speeches, you know, I felt to Black people that were very demeaning.

01:25:35:01

You know, he had gone to Morehouse and given this, you know, speech, you know, about you know, not making excuses and dadadadada. And I felt like here these boys just walked through fire and are graduating. They don’t need you hectoring them man. You know, they know things that we will never know, you know. I felt that he was deeply insensitive sometimes, particularly

to young Black boys in his rhetoric, and so—I had Malcolm X on my iPhone, I’m listening to it, trying to get all hyped up. Well, I get to DC and I’m late, right. Like, I’m running behind. I’m a half an hour behind and it’s raining. And I didn’t wear a suit. Everybody wears a suit to these things.

01:26:13:20

And I didn’t wear a suit, and so I finally—you know, I’m in a cab on my way there, they call to say, “Are you coming?” You know, they’re calling me, you know, “Are you coming? It’s already started, are you coming?” This is the White House man. Finally get there, rain dripping and everything. I come in; everybody in the room is white. Everybody’s you know, all suited up, and I’m like, “God damn. Here I am, Black dude, only other Black dude here is the president. I’m late, I’m wet.” You know what I mean? I’m not in a suit, like I’m not really representing so they—this time they sat me directly across from him. And he looks up, he’s answering somebody questions. “Nice of you to join us.” Or whatever sarcastic thing he said, something like, “Nice of you to join us.” Or he said something like that.

01:26:52:06

So I sit down and I’m, you know, I’m late but I’m already amped up, like I’m like, I have to—you know what I mean, be confrontational, gotta do—and I’m watching him and the thing about him is he’s extremely intelligent, so they’re going through like, every—asking questions about the environment, questions about the Middle East, questions about China, economy, and he’s just rattling ‘em off, you know what I mean? He’s not—you know what I mean, like these deep impressive answers. I’m like, “Wow, sugar man.” So I’m

getting up like slightly intimidated now, but I'm still gonna do it, right? So everybody has to, you know—Mr. President, Mr. President. I say Mr. President.

01:27:27:00

And I asked him about—something about the Medicaid expansion and the fact that large numbers of Black people had been left exposed because of the way they had done, basically, healthcare. And he answered and I was like, “Can I respond?” And he was like, “Sure.” And we must've went—you know, in my mind it's like we went back and forth for like an hour, but of course—you know what I mean, but like we went back and forth for like lets say five or ten minutes, and all the other white people are looking at us like, “Are they fighting?”

01:28:00:23

And so afterwards, I go up and I'm like—alright, I should, you know, thank him, you know what I mean, for having me down here, I should be re—even though you know, I was, you know, I should be, you know, respectful, you know. So I'm gonna go over to B, so I go over, I shake his hand, and he starts going in me again about something else I wrote. You know, he's upset about this thing I wrote about this speech he gave to, you know, march on Washington.

01:28:18:13

I thought it wasn't a good speech. I didn't think it was a good speech at all. I think a lot of times when you write, it never occurs to you, and it should not

occur to you, frankly, who is reading you and who is not. You should write honestly. But like I had no inkling before that started that he was actually reading anything that I wrote. For me it—it—it—and he like, he actually to some degree actually did care, you know what I mean, like he actually was trying.

01:28:44:00

Like I always—and I felt like this at the time, it wasn't a political rhetorical move for him. Like he actually believed—even though I thought he was dead wrong, he believed, you know, what—this kind of respectability politics thing, he actually believed it, you know, what he was saying. You get nostalgic for the days when that was your opposition. You know what I mean? Even when you thought somebody was wrong, you did not doubt their basic goodness and sincerity, you know. And it's just—it's a different world.

The burden of racism

01:29:16:05

I—I think like what this country largely does not understand... is the difference in having somebody who is not perfect and again is sometimes dead wrong but actually is thinking their way through something. Like, is actually reading intelligence from places, is reading stuff. And even if they arrive at the wrong conclusion, they—they went through the legit process of it. And to me, the notion that the country would follow a Black man like that who would do that with someone who needs like intelligent briefings with

graphics and charts. No Black man could be president like that. No Black—there is no—no Black person could be Donald Trump. Racism is not just a burden for Black people. It—it will destroy us all. It'll consume us all. And this is the clearest illustration of it. It's very sad. It's extremely, extremely sad.

Obama's temperament

01:30:26:07

TA-NEHISI COATES:

Yeah, I mean the-- part of that's-- you know, first of all, it's probably his trait, it's him. I don't want to diminish that, but I do think... There's a way that you learn how to conduct yourself in a world when people are watching, and people are looking at you, and you know that you're surrounded. You know, by folks who may not, you know, be of good will. Um, I think he-- he's level. He's an extremely level dude, you know. He don't get too hot and he don't get, you know, too cold. Um, at the same time he's a human being, you know, who could not, you know-- you know, Sandy Hook is, you know-- I mean, you have a massacre, you know, of- of- of- of children. You know? And the country, as he probably had some idea at the time, is paralyzed in its ability to do anything about it. You know?

Obama's perspective on White America

01:31:25:11

Obama's perspective on white America was a major contributing factor in him becoming president. I think it was a major limiting factor once he became president. We deeply underestimate the power of hate, you know.

Of a particular kind of politics that, you know, takes as its base, I'm not you. You live over there, I live over here, I'm with my people, you're with yours. Now there were a lot of things that had to happen, you know, in order for Trump to be president, right. You know, I will certainly grant that. You know, you needed an opponent who had you know, relatively high negatives herself. You know, you needed, you know, him to win in certain states where that opponent would have more of the popular vote and yet he could prevail through the electoral college. You needed the total collapse, you know, of the Republican Party.

01:32:18:16

But even that, on that last factor, I think like he just missed the extent to which what Trump was saying was in fact in deep concert with folks that he had been facing for the past eight years. You have to have some degree of optimism and some degree of faith in white America because it's the majority of the population in order to be president. I don't know how you become president without that, right?

01:32:40:14

But I think also that that faith might prevent you from seeing certain things. I think again about the fact of him being outside of those two stories, the story of the northern cities and the stories, you know, of the south. Well, what that means is you have not directly seen how evil this can get, you know, you

don't have a friend who's actually murdered by a police officer. That's not something that you really have. You don't have relatives, you know what I mean, who have memories of lynching's.

Shirley Sherrod

01:33:18:08

I think about like Shirley Sherrod. I think that was a really, really telling incident. Here you have a Black woman, who--civil rights activist, part of SNCC. Actually when, you know, SNCC has it's schism, when it goes, you know, some folks want to go, you know, the Black power separatist route, other folks, you know, are, you know, still believe in the integrationist route. This Black woman who went the integrationist route, believed in it, like the last candidate in the world, you know, for—and is that, but like in her family, you know, is this history of lynching and brutality, just the worst kind of racism that you ever want to see. And the notion that the Obama administration bought that this woman was perpetrating some sort of vengeful scheme against white people.

01:34:06:21

It was sad that, you know, you would part with Shirley Sherrod, you know, who in some really, you know, profound way as I've written made it possible for a Black president to exist. You know, in pursuit of people who don't like you, who will never like you. Who will never believe you, who will never support you, who have never accepted you. It was incredibly, incredibly sad.

The belief in the goodness of white America did not allow you to see that this could actually get really bad, that this could get really, really, really, really bad. I know he'll have you know, a different, you know, version of that, you know, and he would disagree with that but I think to me that was the tragedy of it.

01:34:59:16

TA-NEHISI COATES:

Andrew Breitbart was a provocateur, you know, who came to quite a bit of prominence in the early years of Barack Obama's presidency and during the candidacy, right wing. He got this Shirley Sherrod tape which went everywhere and in this Shirley Sherrod tape it was this woman who, you know, worked for the Department of Agriculture who allegedly was perpetrating some sort of scheme to take vengeance on white people—on white farmers because she was, you know, upset, you know, about something or rather.

01:35:31:09

Well, the tape goes viral, it's everywhere and it gets to the Obama administration, and I believe by the end of the day or maybe a day later, she's driving and they call her and they say, "You need to submit your resignation right now." Via Blackberry. And this woman has to pull over to the side of the road and submit her resignation via Blackberry. This is somebody who put their body and life on the line, you know, during the Civil Rights movement. I—I'm not being metaphorical. I mean literally, you're in Albany—you are risking your life. This is somebody who—lynching is not myth or history to

26

her. It's like she has a cousin who was lynched. It's like right there, it's touchable. And they're telling this Black woman, "Pull over to the side of the road and submit your resignation via Blackberry." That's their message to her. They believe Andrew Breitbart. They believe the guy who actually is trying to do them in more than they believe themselves and believe that they need to take a moment to try—maybe we need to figure this out.

01:36:32:00

Well, the full context of the tape comes out like a day later and it turns out of course she wasn't saying that. What she was actually saying was, you know, she had all of this anger because of what had happened in her history and about how she got over it, you know, and ended up helping folks out. It went so bad that they ended up in—they found the white farmers who she was actually talking about, and they interviewed them and they said, "No, Shirley was always helpful to us." The idea that they were so skittish, the Obama administration I mean was so, so skittish. Now, what they'll say is listen, that never got to me, I was—you know, I'm President, I'm up here. But these are your people, right? So you're responsible for them.

01:37:07:10

Wow, that was a very early warning sign. It was a really, really early warning sign. Andrew Breitbart passes away, but the folks he worked with, you know what I mean, turned his—you know, site into what we now know as Breitbart, which Steve Bannon ends up, you know, basically running the joint, who then helps engineer the election of Donald Trump. It's incredible. It's incredible. I mean, he literally believed the folks who were his foes, you know

what I mean, who were bringing Donald Trump before he believed this Black woman who would risk her life for the possibility of him to exist.

01:37:53:19

That—that meant—I mean that, when I think about like moments and you know, I have moments when I'm really, you know, proud, you know, of Barack. I really do, I really, really do. But that moment is the one I'm like the most ashamed of. You know, you gotta take care of your elders. Shirley Sherrod got told to, you know, pull over and ya know, submit her resignation via blackberry. That cop that arrested Henry Louis Gates, he got to have a beer with the president.

2011 White House Correspondents Dinner

01:38:25:06

TA-NEHISI COATES:

I believe the White House correspondent's dinner that year corresponded with the—right about the time he had to present his birth certificate. And Trump comes to the White House correspondent's dinner and I think there is some level of anger on the other side among, you know, folks who, you know, might be termed liberal about like the whole birther and how it was just taking over everything. I think it was a lot of frustration. So Trump was there and Seth Meyers just went in joke after joke after joke about Trump.

01:38:54:08

And then Barack Obama got up and did the same thing. There is, I think, a lot of revision now that says well that was the moment Trump decided he was gonna run for president and to show Barack Obama. I don't know about all of that. I don't know about all of that. I think Trump chooses his foes. I think he ran against Hillary Clinton; you know. I don't—you know, I'm just gonna say this. I don't think he wanted anything to do with Barack Obama. He had an opportunity to run in 2012, decided against it. I think quite wisely. I don't think he wanted anything to do with Barack Obama at all.

01:39:25:02

So I think like a lot of people felt, well maybe he shouldn't have done x, y, and z. No, I mean you're at war with these people, you know. What role that ultimately played in Trump running, you know, only Trump can know? But I see nothing wrong with humiliating people... who make it their business to try to humiliate you.

Obama's legacy

01:39:54:05

TA-NEHISI COATES:

I think about... the now sort of cliché notion that people say, well I can now tell my son or my daughter they can be president. You know, Black parents would say that. I—that's not a small thing. That's not a small thing. You know, I get asked now, you know, "Do I think there'll be another Black president in my lifetime?" Yes, I do. Before Barack Obama, this was like comedy. This was

29

a Dave Chappelle joke. You know, I mean, this was a Chris Rock movie. That—that was you know, where you know, Richard Pryor—that was where we went to discuss Black presidents.

01:40:24:18

It's not like that anymore. And I think actually that was manifest in these midterms, you know, with Stacey Abrams and Andrew Gillum, who came within a hair's breadth, you know, of being governors of states in the deep south. And that's I think a manifestation of a different kind of imagination. And you can't you know, take that away, you know, I think that, you know, in terms of what people will feel themselves able to do. And beyond that, I would suspect that the next person, whoever it is, might not feel so hamstrung. That's the other thing, he's first. You know, certain rules you have to obey, you know. I suspect maybe the next person will feel a little differently about what they can and can't say.

01:41:03:08

TA-NEHISI COATES:

The biggest impact in terms of, you know, that younger generation is among white children. There are now white children who really earliest memories of any sort of president is a Black guy. I don't think that's small at all because I think your ability to imagine who can occupy the highest levels, you know, in society directly informs your ability to see people as human. That's not the whole battle. That's not everything. But it certainly is a component. Listen, if it meant something that every other president before Barack Obama was white, and it did because we talked about it all the time.

30

01:41:43:04

You know, before Obama, we made—it was always a sort of rhetorical point, then it really means something that you know, Barack Obama was president. Ya know, it has to. It has to. So, I think for those kids—and it's not just Barack. It's like—like, they grew up with that. You know, they see Black Panther, you know what I mean? They see Kendrick Lamar. It's like all of these, you know, different spaces where they see Black people, you know. I think that's significant. I think it means a lot.

END TC: 01:42:15:11