PBS.ORG | VIDEO | TV SCHEDULE | PROGRAMS | DONATE | SHOP You may also like:American Experience,PBS Newshour,Need To Know FOLLOW PBS:
PBS Search Search This Site Search P
Support for PBS.org provided by: What's this?

Interview Cassandra Butts

When did you first meet Barack Obama?

It was one of the first few days of our law school experience. We met at the financial aid office at Harvard Law School. We were going through the process of filling out a lot of paperwork that would make us significantly in debt to Harvard for years to come. We bonded over that experience.

What was he like?

The Barack that I knew at the time is fundamentally the Barack that you see today, the candidate. He was incredibly mature. He had spent three years as a community organizer in Chicago, so he came to law school without some of the angst I think that many of us had who were only a year, or maybe less than a year, away from college. He was very mature, and he was very directed. He knew what he wanted to do: get his law degree and learn as much as he possibly could and take that experience back to Chicago and work in the same communities that he had worked as an organizer.

He was a very calm presence and someone who had a very good sense of himself, where he fit in, and what he wanted to do with his life.

Calm presence in the heart of [a] highly politicized Harvard Law School at the time, [with] the Derrick Bell stuff, lots of other issues. [Editor's Note: Bell was the first African American professor to be granted tenure at Harvard Law.] Bring me there. ...

Historically, Harvard Law School had had about a 10 percent African American population, and it was about 10 percent when we were there. You had classmates who you could identify with, just in terms of your background. But there weren't a lot of role models in terms of the faculty. We had about a handful of African American men who were on faculty, but we had no women of color on faculty, which ended up being the [basis of the] Derrick Bell protest [against university hiring practices] and his decision to leave the law school. I participated in [it], just in terms of organizing the effort, and Barack participated also.

Some of the people we've talked to say there was a real difference [in] the way Barack approached the dispute versus some of the other African American students at that time.

I want to be clear that it was definitely a mixed group of students who were part of the effort. It wasn't just African American students. And Barack was definitely challenged at the time because he had just been accepted to the *Harvard Law Review*. He didn't have as much time to devote to anything that was outside, that was extracurricular, because he spent so much time at the *Law Review*. ...

When he takes over at the *Law Review*, how important is that?

It was pretty significant. He was the first African American president of the *Law Review*, and the symbolism of it was very, very powerful. It was an African American ascending to what was the highest, most coveted position for a student at the law school, being president of the *Law Review*. And it was someone we could identify with.

And for him personally, what does it mean? Ordinarily, it means Supreme Court clerkships and all of those things.

I was as close to Barack as anyone in law school. He'd never expressed an interest in being president of the *Law Review*. It wasn't something that he talked about. Frankly, he was drafted by his colleagues on the *Law Review* to run. They made the case why he should run and why they thought that he could lead the *Law Review*. And they thought that he would be able to bring together the factions that had developed as a result of the divisions, the ideological divisions on the *Law Review*, on the left and the right. ...

Why? What was it about him?

Barack, from the start, had a leadership style that was very embracing. He was clearly seen as a leader, but at the same time, he didn't put himself out as a leader. We had a lot of people who were pretty ambitious at the law school, people who had political ambition. They were not quiet in their political ambition and putting themselves out as leaders. That wasn't Barack. …

It's personality, but it's also a function of his experience as a community organizer. As a community organizer, you are not the person who's out in front. You want the community to be out in front. You want the community to be the ones who are voicing the concerns and who are the leaders. ...

Were you surprised that he ran [for president of the *Law Review*]?

I wasn't surprised that he ran. I wasn't surprised that his colleagues would ask him to run. I've never been surprised in the time that I've known Barack. I've never been surprised in his ability ... or his leadership ability and his skill and in the fact that he becomes the person who's out in front. ...

Do you know why he decided to write *Dreams From My Father*?

Barack is a writer. At heart, I think that if left to his own devices, he would write, so it wasn't necessarily surprising that he was interested in writing a book. It was surprising that it ended up becoming a memoir. I think that some might call it presumptuous that someone at his age was writing a memoir. I think that he actually indicated this in the book, that he was initially thinking about writing essays about politics and culture, but that's not what came out. What came out was a memoir, and a pretty good memoir.

Take me, to the extent that you know it, through what that search for identity was for him.

This was actually amusing to those of us who knew him during law school. Barack's identity, his sense of self, was so settled. He didn't strike us in law school as someone who was searching for himself or had searched for himself a few years previously and had come to this realization of who he was. No one is ever fully formed, but Barack was as fully formed as a person could be at that point in his life.

And so when we read *Dreams From My Father*, we were surprised that he had gone through all of this angst and this search for identity, how tumultuous it had been, how recent it had been. That wasn't the person that we knew, but it clearly informed the person that he had become. And he was fortunate in that he had figured it out early enough in his life that he was able to put that behind him and move forward in ways that others hadn't done and were still trying to figure out. ...

Is he somebody who talked about being a black kid with a white mother in Kansas, Hawaii, Indonesia, the whole journey?

I can't say that I got the entire narrative in one sitting. But when we were in law school for a three-year experience, you got bits and pieces. And you ultimately got the entire narrative. ...

... You say he already seemed to be fully formed, but did he ever talk to you about moments that mattered or how he got there?

We definitely talked about his experiences from going to Kenya and meeting his father's family for the first time, the time he spent in Indonesia with his mother and his stepfather. You definitely got those parts of the conversation.

He didn't talk a lot about his experience of growing up in Hawaii. ... He was nurtured by his white grandparents and his mother, but when he went out on the street, he was identified as an African American. He didn't talk a lot about what that meant to him. But it was clear that it had informed his thinking about not only who he was, but also about the issues and about how he dealt with people.

Barack has had to deal with dueling identities all of his life. ... He has had to make sense of that duality his entire life. And I think that that's one of the reasons why he is not prone to either/ors. He appreciates that it's usually a bit of both. And that's the way he thinks about the issues. So you could say his life experience has informed his approach to politics and his approach to policy.

When he's sitting at a sort of supercharged, maybe dichotomous Harvard Law School, at least in terms of race and gender, he really is a kind of composite of an understanding. Yes, he's African American and looks that way, ... but he can talk and be attractive to Brad Berenson, [associate White House counsel, 2001-2003,] and the Federalist Society.

Absolutely. He essentially spent his life trying to synthesize the duality of being one person in one place and being another person in another place. And what I like to say to people is that Barack never meets a stranger. And I think that that's one of the things that makes him so effective as a politician. When he meets people, when he sees people, when he's interacting with people, he isn't inclined to stereotype people. He ultimately has met you before in some other experience or someone just like you. ...

Did he ever talk about the things that were problematic, that were challenging [about the *Law Review*]?

I think what people expected of him, how people expected him to identify. Again, it wasn't

something that he talked a lot about, but once you knew the narrative, you definitely appreciated that that was a challenge. ...

Barack was not and is not predictable. He's thoughtful, he'll tell you what he believes, but it isn't always what you expect. ...

His ideological approach is to the left, and there was an expectation that as the president of the *Law Review* that he would side on the part of his more progressive colleagues. But he recognized that his role was such that he had to bring both sides together. In order to publish the *Law Review* and to be productive in his term as president, he had to figure out how to make it work and how to make both sides work together, which meant that he wasn't always going to side with his progressive colleagues, that he had to take the interests and the ideas of the people on the right into account. …

It is Barack's natural inclination to reach across the aisle. It's [his] personality, and it's also just his intellect. ... He's not interested necessarily in dominating the conversation. He wants to bring people into the conversation. He wants to understand different points of view, and understanding those different points of view informs the way he thinks about issues.

It isn't necessarily that it's going to change his opinion, but it will make him more thoughtful as he approaches an issue. And I think that that is what has informed his experience in public life, what informed his experience on the *Law Review* and what's informed his experience as a public official.

Did he talk at the time about Harold Washington, about Chicago, about putting roots down in Chicago?

Absolutely. He was very influenced by Harold Washington, [Chicago's first black mayor,] and what Harold Washington was able to accomplish in Chicago. If I had to say what were the two most influential experiences for him, that have informed his approach to politics since, I would say that it was his community organizing experience and also the experience of Harold Washington in the campaigns that he ran successfully to become mayor of Chicago.

What Harold Washington was able to do was to pull together coalitions. ... He wasn't a machine candidate; he ran outside of the machine. Washington's coalitions were essentially African Americans, Latinos and progressive whites, and he was able to pull that together and beat the machine. And that kind of coalition building was incredibly influential for Barack. You can see it in his efforts in his Senate campaign, his state Senate campaign, his failed effort in his run for the U.S. congressional seat in Chicago against [Democratic U.S. Rep.] Bobby Rush. And you certainly saw it in his U.S. Senate campaign. ...

Did Barack call you somewhere along the line and say, "I'm thinking about running against Bobby Rush"?

I think that he pretty much made the choice that he was going run against Rush. Objectively, it wasn't a bad choice, because at the time Rush had been weakened by his run against Mayor [Richard M.] Daley for the mayor of Chicago and had lost pretty significantly. ...

I knew what a challenge it was to mount a race against an incumbent, ... and I also appreciated that that was exponentially more difficult in a district that was predominantly African American. ...

What did Bobby think of this upstart?

I think he saw him as an upstart. ... Bobby Rush cut his teeth as a Black Panther in Chicago, and obviously Barack's background and experience was quite different. ... He wasn't favorably disposed to Barack, to put it mildly.

He said something about Barack having to get his black ticket punched before he gets

to run on the Far South Side of Chicago or anyplace else if he hopes to get African American votes. And in the process of dropping a taproot deeply into Chicago, he does do those things. He finds a church. He meets Michelle, which is mightily helpful. I'm not saying it was a crass decision, but it was a good move.

It was a wonderful thing to happen to him. It was very clear how important she was to him. ...

Wonderful beyond just the personal, emotional stuff? Was he happy about who she is and her family is, the way that she helped connect him to Chicago politics?

I think that he certainly identified with Michelle and her experience and her family. But it was personal. I'm just very resistant to this notion that there was some political calculation involved. It was a very important personal connection with Michelle, and the fact that she was so rooted in the community had obvious value, but it was very personal.

Could you describe their relationship?

It's loving; it's supportive. They ground each other. ... Barack is very smart and very intellectual, but in Michelle he found a partner who was able to ground him personally in ways that he hadn't been previously, in no prior relationships. And that has been profoundly important to him.

He has mentors, [former pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ] Rev. [Jeremiah] Wright, [former U.S. Rep. Abner] Mikva [D-Ill.], [former Federal Communications Commission chair Newton] Minow and others. How does he see those people? How valuable are they to him?

I think extremely valuable. They're sounding boards. He's able to use them to help think through issues like you would with any important person in your life. They bring an experience that he may lack.

But ultimately it's Barack making the decision, and the most important validator in his life is Michelle. And when they can come together in agreement, that's how he moves forward. That's how he decided to run for president: Michelle agreed that it's something that she was willing to allow the family to experience, and that was the validation that he needed to move forward. ...

The 2004 Democratic convention really lights the candle for this guy.

It was obviously an incredible opportunity. But in Barack style, he kind of took it in stride. ...

I remember calling him after the speech, and he said, "You know, that was pretty good," which is, in Barack-speech, phenomenal. ...

As [former Sen.] Gary Hart [D-Colo.] says, there's always this big moment of change, where the eyes and the aspirations of the voting public, or even the older guys and women who run the party, they skip a generation and go looking for somebody younger to be the change agent. He immediately becomes one of the primary focal points of that aspiration after the speech. Does he know that?

It was hard not to appreciate that he was seen by party officials, by the public, as someone who was the next generation of leaders. And it wasn't so clear, I think as I indicated, when we were thinking strategically about what we wanted to accomplish [in his first term in the Senate]. Again, it wasn't with an eye on the 2008 race. And so, while you had a lot of questions about would he run for president, those questions were more focused on 2012, or possibly 2016 if a Democrat was successful in 2008. But they definitely saw him as a new generation of leadership in the Democratic Party, with the potential of leading the country. ...

We talked to Sen. [Tom] Daschle [D-S.D.], who says he was blown away by Sen. Obama. ... He said to Sen. Obama: "The window is open. ... It was open for me once upon a time, and I didn't jump through it. And I'm here to tell you now, if the window is open -- and I think it is -- you ought to really seriously consider jumping through it, because you may not get another opportunity."

That was certainly a part of the calculation in his decision to run, that he would have only served in the Senate for a year and a half. There's always the challenge that the longer you serve in the Senate or in the House of Representatives, you get a voting record, and that voting record becomes fodder during a campaign. And it isn't necessarily helpful the longer your voting record is, because your opponents can take votes out of context and blow them up to a degree that make you appear to be something that you're not, and caricature you as a candidate. ...

Barack was definitely advantaged by the fact that, even at that point, you were sensing that there was some fatigue in the party with the Clintons, and that while Sen. [Hillary] Clinton [D-N.Y.] was very well regarded by colleagues and by the public, people were uncertain that they wanted to go from one family dynasty to another family dynasty. ...

You must know the Clinton people well enough over your career to know what their assessment of him was. What were they thinking about the young upstart Obama?

I think that there are a number of people who were supporters of Sen. Clinton who liked Barack a lot and thought that he had a great future in the party, but just not in 2008. … They saw in Barack someone who was very talented but completely untested as a national candidate. And many of them had the experience of going through the presidential cycles with President Clinton, knew what it took and questioned whether Barack had the intestinal fortitude to make it through a presidential race. ...

Did they really understand this yearning for change that we keep talking about?

No one understood it better than Barack. ... One of the things that Barack did over the course of his first year in the Senate was to do a lot of fund-raisers for his colleagues and for the DSCC, the Senate campaign committee for Democrats. He would draw these incredible crowds. He did the Kansas Democratic Party dinner, and they sold out after only maybe an hour or so of tickets being available. He went up to Vermont to campaign for [Sen.] Bernie Sanders, and the room was too small to hold all the people who wanted to participate. ... [So] maybe this was more than just a convention speech. Maybe this was more than just a candidate who would be ready to run in 2012 or 2016. Maybe there was a moment in 2008 that he should take advantage of.

And Mrs. Clinton was missing that.

I think that if you look at some of the comments that have been made by the Clintons, their supporters and advisers, there certainly wasn't an awareness to the level of support that Barack was gaining and the level of enthusiasm for him as a candidate. They didn't get that. And there's no reason why they would have gotten it if they weren't watching him as closely as those of us who were working with him were watching him. They were very confident -- and rightly so -- in the infrastructure they had put together.

Sen. Clinton had just won her re-election and had raised a ton of money to do that. Her favorability ratings were very high within the party. ... People within the party had a lot of good feelings about the Clinton administration years, so their assessment of her strengths and the fact that they didn't appreciate Barack's strengths, that didn't surprise us.

How did [Obama's chief of staff and former aide to Tom Daschle] Pete [Rouse] and others you brought to the table, including yourself, helped him navigate that first year and a half? ...

Barack is a very talented person. ... But even as talented as he is, he had a learning curve, ... so it was really important to bring Pete onboard, because [he] was able to, for all intents and purposes, eliminate the learning curve. He knew the Senate. He knew what it took to be a good senator, and not just knowing who to call if Barack is interested in a particular committee. ... Pete understood better than anyone that if you're not representing the people of Illinois, that weakens your ability to become this national figure. ...

I can't say enough about how important Pete has been to Barack's success. ...

Where is [Obama's chief strategist David] Axelrod and the election apparatus? ...

David was in Chicago and was a part of the strategic discussions about what Barack wanted to accomplish during his first Senate term, but wasn't pushing him in the direction of a presidential run. ...

Part of the strategy was that Barack has always been interested in policy; he would stay engaged on the national policy front, but that he would keep his head down, that he would be the senator from Illinois. He visited, I think, almost every county in Illinois his first year.

Eventually he makes the decision to run [for president]. Iowa is happening. ... As you approach the Iowa caucus day, do you know, does he know he's going to win?

No. He definitely believed -- and from the internal polling that the campaign was doing -- that it was a very close race. When Barack decided that he was going to run, it was his vision to run a campaign that was a grassroots organizing campaign, very much influenced by his community organizing experience.

It was consistent with what we believed would be his strengths. We knew that Barack didn't have the kind of national infrastructure that Sen. Clinton had, and he would not be able to do what Sen. Clinton would be able to do in terms of fund raising. ...

Rather than focusing on fund raising, we would focus on the organizing element, the number of people that we would be able to bring into the campaign. And that focus definitely made a difference in Iowa and in other caucus states. And that grassroots focus, to our surprise, turned out to be significantly important on the fund-raising side, too, which just allowed the campaign to redouble its efforts on the organizing side when the money came in. ...

People came to the table because [they were] very much attracted to Barack's message of change. We were at a point in our nation's history where things were not going well. … The point of entry for them was his position on Iraq; the fact that he had good judgment on that decision which was pretty significant. …

I would definitely say that we were confident that we would win. It was cautious optimism. And when it happened, it was incredibly sweet.

What was [the Iowa win] like? ...

I was in New Hampshire and watching the caucus returns with a group of supporters, including our state director in New Hampshire, Ned Helms. ... We were turning from MSNBC to CNN. ... It was very close.

And I think at one point, MSNBC called it for Obama. And it was still incredibly close, and CNN hadn't called it yet. So I'm sitting there. ... I've got to know. So I stepped out of the room, and I called him, and I said, "MSNBC is reporting that you've won." And it was like he was in a backroom or in a corner of a room, because he was kind of talking in a low voice. He said, "Yeah, we've won." And it was as emotional as I've heard him during the course of the campaign. ... He was clearly moved by the experience and the fact that people didn't think he would be able to do it. ...

... It probably would have been all over if he had won New Hampshire. What happened?

I don't think anyone knows quite what happened. We were seeing a bounce in the polls after winning in Iowa. And being in New Hampshire and seeing some of the events that he was doing, and the level of energy that was there, ... you would have been hard-pressed to say that it wasn't his race.

Sen. Clinton just showed herself to be the tough and seasoned candidate that we knew she would be, and she was able to pull it out. Quite frankly, I think it was the best thing that could have happened for Barack and for the campaign. ...

Sen. Clinton and her strategists definitely thought it would be a very quick race, that they would ultimately be able to pull it out by Super Tuesday. But we thought it would be a long race. We had no expectation that he would win Iowa, New Hampshire, and that it would be that easy. ...

He's won Iowa. He loses New Hampshire and Nevada. So now it's a race. I think of South Carolina as Bill Clinton versus Barack Obama.

I think that there were some times when Barack thought, "Is it Bill Clinton versus Barack Obama?" ... I paraphrase, obviously, but I think it definitely felt that way. President Clinton was a presence, a significant presence, in South Carolina. He was everywhere.

And race -- the thing Barack Obama didn't really want to address, but knew that he would have to. My sense was the Clintons always enjoyed tremendous support in the African American community.

Absolutely. I know that that was part of their calculation going into the race. ... And they didn't think that Barack would be able to overtake [her].

But if I could take a step back, the issue of race first came to the fore in the campaign [with] questions of whether he was black enough. I remember there was some consternation, and friends of Barack's wanted to respond to it, felt that you really needed to address it head-on, and you couldn't let it go unanswered.

I remember Barack's assessment was that, "It's understandable that people would have questions about me; they don't know me as well as people in Chicago know me." And he said, "Once the African American community gets to know me, they know where I stand on issues, I will earn their support. "

So when these issues of whether he was black enough came up, whether he would be able to win support in the African American community came up, his approach to it was: "I'm going to earn their support like I'll earn the support of others in this campaign. And I'm just going to do the hard work that it takes to get that done."

So he didn't react to it in a way to overcompensate what was, to some, his lack of blackness. He said: "I'm going to earn the vote. I've done that in Chicago, I did that in Illinois, and that's what I'm going to do with the black community." And that's what he succeeded in doing. And South Carolina was the first real test of that.

Were [Harvard Law professor] Charles Ogletree and [Princeton University professor] Cornel West and others, saying to him, "You've got to address being black"?

There was certainly a challenge at the very early stage of the campaign. Tavis Smiley, who is a commentator, a journalist, has an event every year, the State of the Black Union, and he invited Sen. Obama to participate. It turned out that Sen. Obama was announcing his candidacy for the presidency in Springfield, Ill., the same weekend.

And there were questions raised at that event, by people like Professor Cornel West, about Barack's blackness, and who was this person, and would he be able to address the issues of

importance in the African American community? And I remember that there was some belief that if Barack could have a conversation with Professor West, that he could show him that he understood the issues and would address them head-on. And that conversation was had, and Professor West became an enthusiastic supporter.

So that was just kind of a microcosm of his belief that once people get to know him and where he stands on the issues, they will be supportive of him. So there was definitely a desire on the part of Professor West and Professor Ogletree that Barack get his narrative out there. And that was Barack's desire: We will get the narrative out, and that will be what will draw people to the campaign.

But he had to be careful, right? He has to walk this for the 45-and-older crowd. He can't be [Rev.] Jesse Jackson, you know what I mean?

I understand. [Clearly] there's a balance that has to be struck. But the narrative that would get out in the African American community wasn't any different than the narrative that we would put out in any other community.

And so he was just mindful that he wouldn't make promises in the African American community that that he wouldn't make in the Latino community and white communities. That wasn't what this campaign was about.

But that's new and unique. That's a change moment, isn't it?

It's definitely a different approach, but [it was] just defining of who Barack is and the kind of candidate he would be. ... South Carolina became a real testing ground: Would he be able to appeal to African Americans? Would he be able to appeal to a good percentage of the white community in South Carolina so that it didn't appear that it was all about the African American vote? ...

I'm loath to say that the race card was played, but race clearly became an issue. And the result was that he won an overwhelming majority of the African American vote and won, I believe, 25 percent of the white vote, which was higher than had been predicted.

It was a resounding victory in South Carolina. I remember being at his victory speech in Columbia, S.C. ... You had people who had never had an experience of a black candidate winning the way he had won in South Carolina. It was a mixed crowd of African Americans, whites, Latinos, Asians, [people] from different economic backgrounds, and this chant of "Race doesn't matter!" kind of spontaneously emanates from the crowd.

And in the moment, you just wanted to believe that race didn't matter, and that it wouldn't matter moving forward. But of course we knew that race would matter, and it was something that we would have to be mindful of throughout the campaign. But in that moment in South Carolina, it was incredibly moving. ...

In effect, Obama [has said]: "I don't want to run as a black politician. I want to run as a politician who happens to be or is black." Talk a little bit about that for me. Were you part of that conversation? ...

I do remember in one conversation, ... [Barack] asked us to challenge him on what he would face in running for president, to really ask the tough questions, ... so the issue of race was raised. And Barack did say that he wasn't interested in running as a black politician; he was going to run as a politician who is black, and that those issues would be addressed during the course of the race, but he didn't believe he needed a strategy to deal with the fact that he was an African American running for the presidency.

I do think that that is instructive or informative for how he thinks about his experience as a public official and how he's dealt with race throughout the course of his professional life.

What did you think? ...

Barack doesn't ... think of himself as being post-racial. He is very clear that race is still very much an issue in the U.S. And he's also very clear that there's a division between ... baby boomers who think of race very differently than their kids. ... He recognizes that there's a very different way of approaching the issue generationally. But he doesn't think of himself as a post-racial candidate. A lot of people say that, and I always want to be clear about that.

During the course of our friendship, Barack has always been the one to convince me that things are progressing and that we're at a place where we can do certain things. He convinced me that an African American person like Barack Obama could run and win the presidency of the United States. ...

... What did you make of the controversy over Rev. Wright? ...

Republicans were trying to find some way to caricature Barack. They hadn't been able to find anything prior to the Rev. Wright controversy, and they successfully used the sound bites from a number of different sermons to caricature Barack through the reverend, as someone with fringe ideas that were not consistent with the values of the majority of the electorate. And they certainly had some success in doing that.

You say it was the Republicans? You know it was the Republicans?

I don't know for sure. I think it was Republicans. They'd obviously been searching and working hard to figure out what were Barack's weaknesses and how they'd be able to take him on. That's my assessment of it. Who knows for sure? I don't want to think that it could have been the Clintons. ...

How does Barack respond when this happens?

I think that Barack saw it as comments that had been taken out of context. He had been a member of the church for a number of years, had heard a number of Rev. Wright's sermons, appreciated the wholeness of Rev. Wright's contribution to Trinity and to the community. ...

If you look back through anyone's career, you would be able to find snippets of information that you could pull together that would make them seem less than they were. So he thought that it didn't do Rev. Wright justice. ...

But of course you're savvy about politics, and so is he. Leaving aside the fairness of the charges, you know that politically this is potentially damaging.

Certainly.

Was there a plan in place for this issue? ...

I wasn't a part of the deliberations. ... I just know how things eventually came together. I think that they felt that they would be able to respond to it. Barack felt that he would be able to show that this was a caricature of Rev. Wright and that there was more to him than the YouTube video would indicate. And I'm sure that there were conversations about whether Barack should try to distance himself from Rev. Wright and how to manage it. But there was no plan in place to deal with it.

And that's not his style anyway. He wouldn't want it.

No. It's one of the things that has been very appealing about Barack throughout his candidacy, is the authenticity. ... He's not someone who's going to tell you what you want to hear, but someone who will tell you what he believes you need to hear, even if that's something that you don't want to hear. And so people have embraced that authenticity, and the last thing that he wanted to do was something that was inauthentic. And he was very mindful of that as they attempted to respond to the Rev. Wright controversy. ...

It was very important for Barack to put Rev. Wright into context and why his comments were being used the way they were, to stoke fears and concerns about race, and what's a historical context for that. So Barack decided that he wanted to do the race speech. ...

There were a number of his advisers who thought that that was not the right thing to do. But he was convinced that it was a moment where he could go beyond the Rev. Wright issue, address issues of race that had been an undercurrent of the campaign.

I'd seen a copy of the speech beforehand. But in watching the speech, I was moved to tears. It was just profound. It was just so Barack. It was everything that I believed, and I think people who have known him believed, that he would bring to the race, not just the politician who could transcend race but a politician who would not shy away from addressing race. And it was just an incredible moment. ...

He then must address Rev. Wright one more time [after Wright's remarks at the National Press Club]. How painful was that for him?

I think it was very painful, and it was certainly something that he didn't want to do. He felt he had to do [it], not to salvage his political career or not to salvage his campaign but to respond in a way that was an honest response to a critique that had been lodged against him that he felt was unfair. It was very difficult for him, possibly the most difficult part of the campaign to that point.

It's not that he's conflict-averse, but I don't see him as a guy who's definitive in that kind of put-the-hammer-down-publicly [way] if he doesn't have to be.

It definitely wasn't something that he wanted to do. ... I think that -- and to his credit -- what defined Barack during that time as a different kind of candidate was that the politically expedient response would have been for him to have renounced and denounced Rev. Wright immediately. It wouldn't have been for him to give the race speech. That would have been very politically expedient. But it isn't who Barack is. ...

In the end, of course, he prevails. But I suppose he learned lessons. Do you think, in your observation of him, that something substantially different occurred with him?

Well, you know, he's been tested, and it's an experience that's been invaluable for him. He's gone through the rigor of the longest primary campaign that we've seen in quite a while, if not the longest. He has been tested on a number of different fronts. He had a formidable opponent in Sen. Clinton, whom he was able to defeat.

He addressed the issue of race. And not to suggest that it won't come up again during the general-election campaign, but he has taken on issues that people would have thought would have torpedoed his candidacy, and he's been able to overcome those issues.

So he's been tested, and I think that he's a stronger candidate as a result of it. ...

One more question. I was in Mississippi on Election Day in 1982 and was with the campaign manager for an African American, [Democratic Miss. state Rep.] Bob Clark, who was running for Congress. The campaign manager is looking at the voters going up to a courthouse, and he says on film, "These people are marching from one century to another century." It was 26 years ago. And how does this make you feel, what's happened since?

You really feel like through this campaign we're entering the 21st century. We've always been here for a few years, but you really feel that there is that kind of change going on, that we are marching into the 21st century.

We are realizing the potential of the country in ways that we hadn't previously. People are voting for Barack because they see the promise of his candidacy and of the country, ... and that is just incredibly profound. ...

You still have people who never thought that they would see something like this in their lifetime. You talk to African American voters who are baby boomers or older, and they never thought that they would see an African American who was a serious contender for the presidency of the United States, never thought in their lifetime that they would see it. Before I met Barack Obama, I never thought I would see it in my lifetime. But I'm happy to be in the moment.

posted october 14, 2008; updated december 23, 2008

FRONTLINE series home · privacy policy · journalistic guidelines

FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of wgbh educational foundation.
main photograph © corbis, all rights reserved
web site copyright 1995-2012 WGBH educational foundation