
HANDOUT THREE, LESSON FOUR

INTERVIEW THREADS TRANSCRIPTS

THREAD: ELECTION STRATEGY, THE PRIMARIES

DAVID AXELROD
1:27:28:23 - 1:30:18:06

Well, South Carolina obviously — South Carolina is the first Southern primary. The majority of voters who participate in Democratic primaries — in the Democratic primary there are majority African American, but Barack needed White votes as well to win. He wasn't going to get all the African American votes and wanted them [the White votes] because he didn't want to win on that basis. But it was a crucial primary for both us and Hillary Clinton, and Bill Clinton was campaigning in the state the week before the primary. And he was in rural areas appealing to White voters we felt in ways were sort of dog whistles to these voters. And there was a Mason-Dixon poll the Friday before the Saturday primary that suggested that Obama's White support was collapsing, and that's the way the poll was reported. It was an NBC poll so there was all this apprehension about whether in fact our hopes were going to be dashed, that we weren't in fact in a new era where we could attract a multi-racial coalition.

And the next day I was sitting with Michelle Obama, the day of the South Carolina primary. There was nothing to do but wait. I was sitting with Michelle Obama filming some ad material and my Blackberry went off and it was the initial exit poll and I'm looking at it saying, "Oh I can't believe this, this can't be right." And she's just going, "What? What?" And it says, well, we're going to win handily here. And she slugged me and said, "Don't ever do that to me again." But it was a beautiful night.

I mean there were two great moments in that campaign. One was the night that he won the Iowa caucuses. Maybe the most emotional night that I've ever had in politics. It was just a beautiful, beautiful night because of the kind of up-from-the-grassroots nature of the campaign. We had done what people thought was not possible. South Carolina was a beautiful night as well because he got about 30% I think of White votes in the state in addition to a majority of Black votes and built the multi-racial coalition that we had hoped for, completely outstripped everyone's expectations and in that hall the night when he spoke, there were people chanting "Race doesn't matter." Now that was premature and that was more of a hope than a reality. But this was a big moment in the campaign and I think a big moment for the country.

VALERIE JARRETT
01:14:42:10 - 01:16:54:05

Early in the campaign, because our strategy was all hands on deck in Iowa, other than raising money, he

really moved in Iowa. And the theory of the case was if he could win Iowa, then he would be credible not just to people in White America but also people in Black America who were hesitant about his chances of winning. But that strategy came with a cost, and the cost was Black people feeling somewhat neglected. And people clamored to have him show up in their cities and their towns around the country outside of Iowa where there were large concentrations of Black people. And so one of my responsibilities was running interference and trying to explain why you really had to do this with an "Iowa first" strategy. And that it would be almost impossible with time and money for him to do both.

Now we came up with a magic solution, which was, we asked Michelle to go to South Carolina, where she gave an extraordinary speech that really spoke to the feelings in the African American community, the feelings of fear, worrying would he lose, worrying would he be hurt, worrying about what it would mean for future candidates should this wash out. And I remember on the plane on the way to the speech, Michelle was talking about this feeling of fear and she said, "You know, it's like people who cover their furniture with plastic trying to keep it safe." And so out of this conversation, she really came up with this extemporaneous addition to her speech, where she broke it down and everyone in the audience — which was comprised of primarily African American women and all knew about their grandmother's couch — and this sense that she gave them permission by acknowledging their fear but then said, "Look, I have the most to lose. And if I am prepared to face this for the greater good, you know, take my hand and join me in that effort." And so that really was like the magic solution to what was becoming an enormous problem for our campaign, this sense of Black people not feeling as though they were appreciated or safe to invest.

REVEREND AL SHARPTON
01:15:08:20 - 1:17:07:21

Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton, though I disagree with him on several of the legislative initiatives — namely the welfare reform bill and the omnibus crime bill — but when she came to New York after that as First Lady, ran for the Senate, we had developed a decent relationship. But when Bill Clinton came out after the South Carolina primary and tried to dismiss the significance, that Barack Obama who had upset everyone winning Iowa, lost in New Hampshire. So now South Carolina's the next primary and he won. And Bill Clinton kind of, "Well, even Jesse Jackson won that." What are you saying?

And for me being a recognizable New Yorker nationwide to call him to task, they couldn't say he was

playing politics because I'm saying, "Wait a minute, if that's not outright racist, it's as borderline as you can get. What do you mean, even Jesse Jackson won that?" Then when it came out about the whole question of him saying to Ted Kennedy, "This guy used to — could be getting our coffee." Well, he might have meant that he was a political novice but the racial tone of that. I said to myself, if we caught a right-winger or a Republican saying that, we would not say that — that maybe he was talking politics. So I began to look at it differently and was pounding on it because I was offended, I was insulted, and it was interesting because a couple of years later when Caroline Kennedy and I went — and was having lunch, she said that the first time she had heard Barack Obama speak was at National Action Network Convention. So it was full circle that I was defending her uncle standing up for Obama because of the conversation with Bill Clinton.

FILM CLIP: THE GENERAL ELECTION

SARAH PALIN: I was reading today a copy of the *New York Times*.

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: And I was really interested to read in there about Barack Obama's friends from Chicago.

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: Turns out one of his earliest supporters is a man who, according to the *New York Times*, was a domestic terrorist and part of a group —

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: Part of a group that, quote, "launched a campaign of bombings that would target the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol."

CROWD: Boo!

SARAH PALIN: Man.

NEWS REPORTER: The Palin factor. The campaign that's turned down and dirty. Down in the polls, the McCain campaign has found a new attack dog.

BARACK OBAMA: Senator McCain and his operatives are gambling that they can distract you with smears rather than talk to you about substance.

SARAH PALIN: I am just so fearful that this is not a man who sees America the way that you and I see America.

BARACK OBAMA: They'd rather tear our campaign down than lift this country up. That's what you do when you're out of touch, out of ideas, and running out of time.

SARAH PALIN: I'm afraid this is someone who sees America as imperfect enough to work with a former domestic terrorist who had targeted his own country.

DAVID REMNICK: Even as just a journalist, the crazy emails about how really I got it all wrong, and that Barack Obama was created by terrorists and bomb-throwing radicals. Unfortunately, that crap entered the mainstream. In the name of Sarah Palin. He's pal-ing around with terrorists. This language was — and — and feeling was — is not just some American marginalia over here. People saw it as sufficient enough that it needed whipping up.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER #1: I'm afraid if he wins, the Black will take over.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER #2: He seems like a sheep — or a wolf in sheep's clothing, to be honest with you.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER #3

He must support terrorists. You know, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck. And that, to me, is Obama.

TA-NEHISI COATES: You have to have some degree of optimism and some degree of faith in White America because the majority of the population can already be president. I don't know how you become president without that, right? Or at least at that point, I don't know how you become president without that. But I think also that that faith might prevent you from seeing certain things. The belief in the goodness of White America did not allow you to see that this could actually get really bad.

JOHN MCCAIN: Yes, ma'am. Ma'am, if you're going to walk up like that I'm not going to give you the mic.

MCCAIN SUPPORTER: OK, I gotta ask you a question. I do not believe in — I can't trust Obama. I have read about him, and he's not, he's not, he's a — he's an Arab. He is not — No?

JOHN MCCAIN: No ma'am. No ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that's what this campaign is all about. He's not. Thank you.

THREAD: ELECTION NIGHT

BRODERICK JOHNSON
01:17:18:00 - 01:18:53:11

I was able to get the flight, and I was able to get there in plenty of time to go to Grant Park [in Chicago]. And it's indescribable still. You know, it's one of those moments in life where you just wish you could go back in time and relive it again. You can't. But there were just, you didn't want to have a camera or anything. You just wanted to experience it, and live in the moment. And then talking to my mother about it all, back in Baltimore and hearing how emotional she was, and then myself and thinking, "This really happened, we really did this." There were so many, so many things about it that were so deeply emotional. My wife flew in the next morning, I think it was, and then we went and bought as many newspapers as we possibly could. I think we have a couple hundred still at the house. But that night, it's just indescribable. Indescribable.

And you know what also struck me as I looked at the election returns? We were winning states that a Democrat had not won in a long time. And a Democrat has not won since [as of 2020]. And even states that we didn't win in 2012. The fact that he won Indiana and he won North Carolina, you just were filled with so much optimism about how the country had turned the corner. Not in some post-racial sense, but in some like other thing that's hard to describe, but people really wanted to vote for him, even in states where it was unimaginable. And we'd also run very effective campaigns in all states, no doubt about it.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON
01:59:16:11- 02:02:26:01

Yeah, it's hard to overstate the significance and importance of Barack Obama's victory in 2008. My mother, sharecroppers, a cotton picker's daughter basically, in Alabama. My mother's now 81, 82 years old, and when he won in 2008 — the tears, the joy, the disbelief that this could ever happen in America. That the United States of America — when Maya Angelou would say these yet-to-be United States of America — the cradle, the Latin phrase is E pluribus unum, "Out of many, one." "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." There was a barrage of images, and a combustion of enormous joy that finally, after the blood, and the hate, and the hardship, and the sacrifice, and the enormous suffering. That out of that, this fine young Black man, and his fine young wife, and their two children would be the occupants of the greatest public housing in the world. That the Oval Office would now be darkened, literally and symbolically, by an African American family. It provoked speechlessness. It provoked great disbelief, but joy, overwhelming joy, overwhelming emotions that couldn't be articulated.

I remember I was sitting in the offices of the news outfit that I was commenting on for that morning, and in the greenroom before we went back on again, I was there with Peggy Noonan, and she was commenting as well. And then they all saw my tears, my disbelief. Here I am supposing to be a commentator even though I'm not a journalist, but are you supposed to be a bit dispassionate? No, can't fake it on this day. This is real. This is what it's about. This is what many White people have been able to take for granted, because on 44 occasions you have been able to acclaim maybe to your boredom, to your ennui, that "Ah yeah, another president, okay," but this is a first for us, right? And so that signal moment is so indelibly etched into the collective consciousness of Black people that it spoke to the demons and desires of Black people, to the hopes and frustrations and fears all at once.

02:04:12:08 - 2:05:41:14

And it changed the nation as well. Even those who were hardened, bitter naysayers, or those who didn't think that Black politics made a big difference, and, "Why do you Black people get obsessed with having a Black president? Just vote for a president that will do the right thing," and so on. Some of them even got a chance to see. Or even conservative brothers and sisters to see the outpouring, the enormous hopefulness, because it didn't just help Black people. It brought together the nation. It portended the possibility. It pointed to the enormous possibility that for once we could get this right. That we could bring ourselves together. That we could shirk the irresponsible partisanship that had bitterly divided this country. The fracas we had, the outbursts, and contagion of nastiness, and the biliousness, that was the characteristic moment of American politics. Gone, dismissed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Now comes this political figure, and he brought together so many disparate communities. He gave hope to those who had not had hope for a long time, a voice to those who had lost their voices in the wilderness of American politics, and here this guy sat, and here he was, and it was incalculable, and it brought that sense of hopefulness to this nation.

CORNEL WEST
01:05:55:11 - 1:06:51:23

Well, I remember my feelings when I saw right there on the CNN screen that he won, you know. The tears of so much struggle against a vicious legacy of White supremacy in the history of this nation: slavery, Jim Crow, Jane Crow, lynching, spit on, rebuked, scorned — now you got a Black man in that White House built primarily by Black slaves. That's a moment that I think all of us of all colors who have a care about human beings and the future of American democracy would

feel very, very deeply. I'll never forget that as long as I live — very, very much so. But then the question became, now that we have the success, let's see whether it will be greatness. See, success and greatness are not the same thing for me. Success is being in a position of authority, power, and influence. Greatness is what you do with it.

KEN MACK

01:33:27:03 - 01:36:08:19

Election Night 2008, I went to Grant Park, so I saw his acceptance speech live. But, to tell you the truth, you know, it wasn't unexpected at that point that he was going to be elected. If you looked at the polling ... I — firmly believe that I'll believe it when I see it, right? That there... you know, the, you know, America is a very complicated place, he's the first African American candidate, and it all, of course, in politics it ain't over until people vote. So, I just thought, "Okay I'm not going to say I'm 100% sure," but, you know, it — things looked pretty good; it wasn't an unexpected moment. But it was a great moment. It seemed like the whole country was behind him. I remember waking up that day, flying to Chicago with my wife — we were happy. It seemed like everybody in the streets was happy. Like, we're walking down the streets in Chicago and we see these White Chicago police officers and, you know,

the Chicago police force has subsequently gotten a somewhat-checkered reputation, and even the police were cheering for Obama. He was our guy and he was president. And, if you're in Grant Park, it seemed like America had finally done something significant. I mean, not... not like everything — it's not like race was going to change overnight, but, for somebody like myself, I thought there would never be a Black president in my lifetime. When Barack was elected to the Senate, I thought he would never be president because I thought that America wasn't ready for that. By the time election night came around — you know, obviously this thing, I've had to backtrack on those beliefs, but — In the course of several years, thinking that something's never going to happen in your lifetime. When I grew up, when I was born, segregation was still the law in many states in the United States, and 2008 is a very different world. Even though it was a very different world, I just thought the country wasn't ready for this. So, I thought it was an affirmation of what America could be at its best. America's not always at its best. In recent moments, we've seen America at less than its best, but I felt that night, election night, as a Black man in America, that this is what America could be, this is what it aspired to be, and it was great that Barack seemed to encapsulate that in that moment.