Barack Obama  
The pursuit of identity

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT
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BARRACK OBAMA CLIP: I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story -- that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This is Barack Obama in 2004 before he had held any national political office. Four years later, he would be elected the first black president of the United States.

BARRACK OBAMA: Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over 200 years ago: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ That is the true genius of America.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I'm Lillian Cunningham with The Washington Post, and this is the 43rd episode of “Presidential.”

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This isn't our very final episode of the series, but it is our last episode chronicling the people who've served already as president of the United States. So, I think it's fitting that, in this episode, we come full circle to a question that we've really been asking since the very beginning, which is, 'Who are we?'

Well, that question -- 'Who am I?' -- is essentially at the very core of Obama's own personal story. And his search for an answer parallels our own search to better understand the complexity of America's history and identity.

This is an episode about reaching our first black president 220 years into the American presidency. And beneath that, it's an episode about looking inward and reflecting on who we are as a nation.

I have two guests for this episode, and they're both named David. One is David Axelrod, the political adviser, and the second is journalist David Maraniss, who's here with me now. Well, I
mean, I'll start by just saying: Welcome back, David. You were here not long ago for listeners who listened to the Bill Clinton episode. And, as with Bill Clinton, you've studied Obama through both your reporting for The Post and through the biography of Obama you did. It's wonderful to have you back.

DAVID MARANISS: Thank you. It's great to be back.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Where do you think that we should start in order to understand Obama? What parts of his early story do you think are sort of crucial to understand in order to wrap your head around the president he’ll ultimately be?

DAVID MARANISS: Well, it's partly my bias as a biographer, but I fall heavily on the side that, for understanding any human being, it's really important to understand the place from which they came -- the sociology of it, the geography of it and the people of their early lives.

So, I think that almost everything about President Obama has some explanation in his early life. I think that his story in particular is one of a search for identity -- trying to figure out who he was and what his place was in the world because he came into life with so many contradictions.

Born in Hawaii, August 4, 1961, as what in Hawaii they would call the Hoppa -- mixed race -- of which there were many, many in Hawaii, but not that many who were half black and half white. It was more Asian combinations. So, trying to figure out his identity was really the story of his young life. And I think that that search helps explain everything about him as president.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, I'll come back to how that manifests itself as president. One thing I found very interesting just in going through all of these American presidents is how many of them had an absent father -- either a father who died early on in their life or who, for whatever reason, wasn't a strong part of the family. And Barack Obama has that as part of his story as well.

DAVID MARANISS: Very much so. You know, since you brought up previous presidents, I've often tried to talk about Barack Obama in contrast with Bill Clinton -- because they had so much in common.

They both came out of dysfunctional families, both came out of families where they didn't really know their fathers. Bill Clinton's father was killed before he was born. Barack Obama's father left the family right after he was born. They grew up with alcoholic stepfathers and mothers who were very ambitious in different ways but not always there for them. They came out of nowhere geographically. Southwest Arkansas and Hawaii are about as far from the centers of power as you can get.

And the one additional factor with Barack Obama is that he had the question of identity -- who was he as a black-skinned human being in this society, with a white mother and grandparents.

But they both had to deal with these contradictions that life threw at them, and they did it in completely different ways. Barack Obama essentially spent about eight years of his young adulthood trying to figure himself out -- culturally, sociologically, racially in a very deep inward way -- sort of receding from a lot and trying to understand himself.

And he came out of that, really, as what I would call 'an integrated personality' -- to the extent
that human beings can do, and he did figure himself out. That made him a little less needy, and that would manifest itself in his presidency in some superficial ways, like why doesn't he schmooze more with Congress.

Well, he doesn't need people in the same way. Bill Clinton, in contrast, never resolved his contradictions. He just figured out how to plow through them and survive. He became the ultimate survivor and that helped him get to the White House and then get in trouble in the White House and out of trouble in the White House. So, these two -- yes, you're right: It's often common among people who achieve great things, including presidents, that they come out of family dysfunction.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Do you have any thoughts about why that is?

DAVID MARANISS: Well, I think that part of it can be described by a will to redeem the family. Ronald Reagan, for instance, also had alcoholism in his family, as did Bill Clinton and then as did Obama. And I think that the children of alcoholics have somewhat of a hero complex sometimes, it's called.

I think they also learn how to deal with very complicated situations and how to compartmentalize their lives. And for better or worse, I think those factors also help them move through society more effectively than some other people.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, when you talk about Obama looking inward and trying to figure out his identity -- what's your sense of what he ends up realizing, and how he comes to think about his place in the world?

DAVID MARANISS: Well, there are a couple of ways of looking at that. One is a search for home. You know, here he is as a child -- first at age 5 finding himself in Indonesia, this exotic, foreign place where he didn't know the language and had to learn it and adjust.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This is his stepfather --

DAVID MARANISS: -- With his stepfather, Lolo Soetoro. I'm sorry. After his mother remarried an Indonesian, they moved to Indonesia.

But then he was sent back to Hawaii to live with his grandparents. And so, he always had a sense of 'Where's my home?' And I think that that was both personal and sociological, in the sense that he was also trying to figure out, 'Who am I racially?'

And so, that search for home eventually led him finally to Chicago and Michelle and an embrace of the African-American community, and that was an important part of him understanding who he was. It took him a long time to get there, but once he did, it helped him sort of develop a sense of self.

On another level, it was, 'What is my role in this world?' And I think that the fact that he was a Hoppa -- that he could see so many different sides of life and of people and he didn't feel like, to use a cruder expression, he didn't have his own tribe -- that gave him this universality. And he tried to figure out, how can he use that?
And I think that has been expressed all the way through his career, never more so than the 2004 keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention where he was talking about not red states or blue states, but how he was a representation of all of it -- of all of America -- and he wanted to bring that out. So, I think that was just rhetoric, and he wasn't able to pull that off entirely as president. But it really was more than rhetoric. It was an expression of who he is.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What about this question of ambition? What does that look like in him early on? Would you say this is someone who seems like they want to be president or who's setting themselves up for a leadership role in the world?

DAVID MARANISS: Absolutely not. It's striking to compare Barack Obama with, say, Bill Clinton in that regard. Clinton, who was talking about being president from a very early age and whose mother said he'd be president someday. With Barack Obama, you really saw none of that. You saw somewhat of a rebelling in his high school years. He loved basketball. He was smart. He wasn't a bad student, but he wasn't applying himself in any leadership positions.

He went to a excellent private school in Honolulu -- Punahou. But he was not part of the student leadership in any sense. And even when he got to Occidental in suburban Los Angeles, for the first two years of his college career, it was only toward the end of that period that you could start to see the earliest formations of his political will, when he participated in a few demonstrations -- anti-apartheid demonstrations.

But he always had what I would call more of a writer's sensibility than an activist sensibility, because even when he did start participating in politics, he could observe himself participating in politics and see somewhat of the -- not the circus atmosphere of it -- but the unreality of it, or the sort of acting part of it.

And he never felt quite comfortable with that. So, he always was more the moviegoer, because he can observe everything else around him and that's his first sensibility -- whereas activists and politicians tend to not have that self-consciousness about it.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, one thing I've asked on a lot of these episodes -- and I guess this would be the last episode I asked it on -- is: Imagine if I were going on a blind date with him. More just a character description.

DAVID MARANISS: Yeah, sure. Right. I would say that he would be polite, gentlemanly, slyly funny, sarcastic, self-effacing to some degree, but also with an inner pride and inner confidence that could sometimes seem a bit much.

But I think he would keep that under control. He would want to talk about -- it depends on who you were -- he would talk to different people differently. I think he would want to go to a movie and talk about books. It also depends on what age he is in this blind date. As a young man, I think that would be pretty much it.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: You know, part of what I'm curious about is whether the Obama that we see... Is that image pretty close to what it would be like to know him well and talk with him one-on-one?
DAVID MARANISS: I think it's pretty close. But I think everybody behaves somewhat differently in different situations. I mean, that's human nature. I would say that because he's a black man in America, there are parts of his personality that you can't honestly show in public in his political life.

And the key one is anger. You know, it's a legacy of racism in America that an angry black man is not going to get that far politically. And so, he's always kept that under control. That's not to say that he's an angry person. I don't think he is. But he certainly has frustrations that he's managed to keep under control, and I attribute part of that to -- now going back to your first question about how his early life shaped him – Hawaii.

There's a saying in Hawaii: 'Coolhead, main thing.' It's part of the Polynesian tradition of not showing too much -- keeping your cool. And Obama, even aside from the mainland racist connotations of an angry black man, even before that, he had that coolness to him, sort of a jazz-like coolness. And so, Barack Obama in public doesn't show too much.

One of his young girlfriends in his early life talked about the veil that she could not penetrate of what was inside Barack Obama. She thought she understood him, but she saw there was a remove to him.

And I think there's always been some of that, even in his presidency. You know, he shows that coolness, and it has a lot of positive attributes to it -- his coolness under pressure, his ability to take the slings and arrows of public life and not react peevishly to it, his ability to not sort of fall into the trap of the 24-hour news cycle, but keep his own sense of time and what's important.

All of that is part of that persona inside of him.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: You talked about that part of his personality that was detached in a way and observant. What parts of being a politician, then, came naturally to him? And which did he have to really work at?

DAVID MARANISS: Well, you know, he didn't start as a great orator.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Really?

DAVID MARANISS: The first public speech he gave was at Occidental at an anti-apartheid rally. And he realized that words can move people from that speech. Even though he's observing himself sort of sarcastically as he was talking, he saw the power of that.

But it wasn't until he got to Chicago and started moving through the African-American churches of that city and the phenomenal orators -- preachers -- of Chicago, that he really started to understand the cadences of how to communicate and move people. So, that was something that evolved over a period of time. He's never completely gotten over his self-consciousness or observing of himself being a politician. That can also be a winning thing. I mean, for some people, they see that he gets it. So, it works both ways, but it tends to prevent him from seeing things when the public is demanding it.

There was a period in his presidency when liberal supporters wanted him to be more demonstrative in his reaction to the Republicans. And it just wasn't in his nature. I mean, he

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certainly was trying to figure a way around them, and he did to some extent. But it wasn't his nature to just lash out, and as I said before, it wasn't just not in his nature but also would have, he felt, worked against him as a black man in America.

He's never been a good schmoozer. He's never going to be. I mean, he's very comfortable with people -- with strangers, with people who are down on their luck. You know, he has a winning personality but he doesn't always want to use it on people that he doesn't really respect or care about him, and that includes some other politicians.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, what ends up drawing him to community organizing in Chicago and ultimately sort of pulls him into a political career?

DAVID MARANISS: I think that the community organizing in Chicago, to a strong degree, was a legacy of his mother, who really spent her life working for others often in other parts of the world -- in Indonesia, in India and Pakistan and Asia -- trying to help poor women find their way into making livings.

I think she inculcated in her son that sense of service to others very deeply. And so, at a time when most of his contemporaries who are as successful educationally as he was -- going to Occidental and then getting a degree from Columbia and eventually Harvard Law School -- when he came out of Columbia, a lot of his classmates were going into the financial world.

He did that for a little. But he went to Chicago to become a community organizer. Part of it was he was still searching for his identity and thought that Chicago could be the place where he found it. Chicago had just elected an African American mayor, Harold Washington. Coincidentally, he arrived there about the same time as Michael Jordan, the great basketball player for the Bulls, and Oprah Winfrey.

So, there was a convergence of of African-American talent coming to Chicago at that point, and all of that created a sort of yeast for the young Obama, but it was really on the South Side of Chicago that he started to feel a sense of identity and purpose.

And then, to the second part of your question, I think it was in the frustrations of acting as a community organizer that he started to understand the real forces of power in America and decided that there was only so much he could do from that level. To actually change things, he needed more power, and that would require going into politics and studying the law first.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, let's pause here for just a moment to clarify this part of his timeline. He had graduated from Columbia University in 1983. After that, he made his way to Chicago, where he worked with a nonprofit doing things like helping improve conditions in the city's housing projects, helping clean up hazardous waste in the city, pushing for school reform.

He does all this for several years, and then he applies to Harvard Law School, gets in and he moves back east to Boston to attend law school. He's at Harvard Law from 1988 to 1991, and then after that graduation, he moves back again to Chicago. And this is where we're going to pick back up with his story in 1992. When he's back in Chicago, he's married Michelle. And in that very same year he's also met our next guest, David Axelrod. He would eventually become the chief strategist for Obama's presidential campaign. And so, he's here now to help tell the story of Obama's rise up the political ladder.
So, thanks so much for doing this, David.

DAVID AXELROD: Thank you.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: You know, I thought we could start by -- you first met Obama in 1992, right?

DAVID AXELROD: Yes.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What was your earliest impression of him -- and maybe something that people today would find surprising or revealing about the young Obama?

DAVID AXELROD: I was asked by a friend to meet with him, a friend who said to me, 'I think this could be the first African-American president,' which I thought was pretty grandiose. But I met with him anyway, and we had lunch and the thing that struck me when I met with him was: Here was a guy who had been president of the Harvard Law Review and could have written his ticket anywhere at any corporation or a law firm, and instead had come back to Chicago to run a voter registration drive and join a small civil rights practice and teach at the University of Chicago.

And it was clear that he was contemplating a career in public service, but it was also clear that, for him, this was not an exercise in self-aggrandizement. I mean, he viewed it as public service and as a calling. And that impressed me from that moment.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Maybe you could do the highlights reel of Obama's political rise.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, you know, he ran for the state senate in 1996, ended up unopposed; and he served in the state senate for eight years and was, from the beginning, kind of a star in the state senate for the Democratic caucus, built a lot of bipartisan coalitions around issues like welfare reform and racial profiling and death penalty reform.

And then in 2000, he ran for the U.S. Congress and lost badly by like 30 points to Bobby Rush, who as an incumbent. He lost in a primary. And as 2004 approached, he was facing kind of an existential choice in his political career because he didn't want to continue in the state senate, and he knew that if he ran and lost again that that would be the end of his political career.

But he chose to run for the United States Senate, which was a big leap up. There were seven candidates in the primary, and he was not the best known. He wasn't the best funded. The name Barack Obama was not necessarily a great ballot name, but he had then -- as he has displayed since -- an extraordinary ability to relate to people across this diverse state.

He was obviously comfortable in an inner city churches. He was comfortable in suburban parlors. He, you know, he just related well to people, and in a very positive and inspiring way. And so, he kind of took the state by storm, and in a race in which he started well behind, he ended up winning in a seven-way primary 53 percent of the vote.

And, of course, that summer he gave his speech in 2004 at the Democratic convention in Boston --

BARRACK OBAMA CLIP: Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it: My presence on
this stage is pretty unlikely.

DAVID AXELROD: -- which changed his trajectory forever. He became instantly, overnight a national figure. And it started this in inexorable march to 2008, even though there was no intent on his part or anyone around him that he would be a candidate in 2008.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Well, actually, let's listen now to a clip from that 2004 speech.

BARACK OBAMA CLIP: Well, I say to them tonight: There is not a liberal America and a conservative America. There is the United States of America. There’s not a white America and Latino America and Asian America. There’s the United States of America. The Pundits -- the Pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states. Red states for Republicans. Blue states for Democrats.

But I've got news for them too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states. And we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states. And yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes -- all of us defending the United States of America.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, he gives this speech in 2004, even before he's won his Senate race. How does he go from that all the way to winning the presidency basically four years later?

DAVID AXELROD: When he entered the United States Senate in 2005, his intent was to keep his head down, learn the Senate, try and be productive.

It wasn’t to to embark on a presidential campaign, but by the fall of 2006 there was a real move toward him. And by the end of 2006, he decided to move forward. I did not know when Obama started the campaign for the presidency how he would fare. I had a great confidence in his intellect and his character, but I didn't know how he'd handle the pressure.

He had never been in a race like this before, and I saw him deal with adversity in that presidential race -- whether it was a contest that he had lost or the Reverend Wright contretemps when tapes surfaced of his pastor making incendiary speeches -- and this was sort of a crisis point for his campaign.

And he dealt with it by giving one of the great speeches, which he wrote, about race talking about the issue forthrightly. There was a test of presidential sort of metal. I mean, I watched him during that period and when we were down throughout that campaign, any time we were down, he was the guy who picked the group up.

There was never this sense of blame. There was never a sense of anger. It was always, you know, 'What did we learn and how do we move forward?'

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Can you take us inside some of the discussions about how to approach the issue of race and the fact that this was potentially going to be the first black president -- whether it was that you were wrestling with how to handle racism on one hand, or how to handle complaints on the other that he wasn't at times doing enough to reach out to the black community?
DAVID AXELROD: Yeah. There wasn't a whole lot of overt discussion about the historic nature of his candidacy during that period. Our number one assumption was that it wasn't going to be lost on anyone that he was African-American.

The thing that we wanted to resist was being pigeonholed as a niche candidacy. You know, he always used to say I am from the black community, but I'm not limited to it. One interesting sidelight to that is, you know, throughout 2007, he was trailing Hillary Clinton among African-American voters in polling.

And what we discovered from our research was that it wasn't that African-Americans didn't appreciate that he was African-American, as much as there was a real sense of skepticism among African-American voters that America was ready for a black president would accept a black president.

And what we concluded was that we had to win the Iowa caucuses -- a state that is almost entirely white -- in order to prove to minority voters, and particularly black voters, in the country that it was possible that Barack Obama could get elected president almost immediately after the Iowa caucuses.

You know, our numbers in places like South Carolina just leapt. But it was a conscious thing on our part not to emphasize the issue of race, which was obvious to everyone. When the Reverend Wright's story broke, though, his conclusion -- and he was right -- was this -- you can't avoid talking about it now. And he, you know, it was interesting because he didn't get the full fury of the debate that the Reverend Wright tapes had kicked off until he did some cable TV interviews.

And he called me after and said, 'I want to do a speech. I want to talk about race and put this story in the context of that, and I want to do it' -- and this was on a Friday -- 'no later than Tuesday.' And I said, 'Well, you're going to be campaigning.' He said, 'Don't worry about it. I know what I want to say.'

And he, over the next few days, composed this late at night, and it was brilliant and moving and powerful. But I realized that he had this speech in his head. He knew what he wanted to say. Obviously, the Reverend Wright piece was a different element that he needed to address. But the issue of race itself -- this speech was the culmination of a lifetime of observation and experience.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What do you think his relationship is to the label ‘first black president’?

DAVID AXELROD: One of the most emotional moments that I've ever experienced with him was when we were practicing his speech for the Democratic convention in 2008 a few hours before he gave it.

And he came to a portion of the speech that referenced the fact that he was speaking on the anniversary of Dr. King's speech at the Lincoln Memorial, and when he got to that portion of the speech, he became emotional and asked to be excused and went into the restroom and came back and said, 'You know, I didn't really absorb the enormity of this moment until now.'

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I would love to hear the memory that stuck with you most from the night that he won the election in 2008.
DAVID AXELROD: I remember going over to see him after it was clear that he had won the presidency, and they had shut the elevators off to his floor. We had to go to a lower floor and walk up the staircase. And in the staircase, there were Secret Service and police in numbers that I hadn't seen before.

And when we walked into his suite, there is something about the presidency -- you could almost see him absorbing the responsibilities that were now his.

There was a weightiness there that struck me -- that all of a sudden, he's separated from us and the burdens of the world were his. It's hard to explain, but it was very palpable to me that everything had changed in that moment. He wasn't Barack, you know, the guy I had known since he was a kid who returned from law school.

He was now the president of the United States.

BARACK OBAMA CLIP: If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy -- tonight is your answer.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: If it wasn't obvious before, certainly going through the exercise of moving through the American presidency from the very beginning until now, it becomes so clear how much issues of race and equality have really defined the American story throughout the country's history.

And so, we've reached the first African-American president we've had in our country. Kind of a vague question, but how do you think that Obama processes that moment? And we as a country process that moment? To what extent does that shape the way that Obama thinks about the task before him?

DAVID MARANISS: Boy, those are --

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Sorry, that was very lengthy.

DAVID MARANISS: And it's really at the heart of his story and of the American story.

To leap forward, I think that in 50 years, it will be seen completely differently, much more deeply important than we realize it is now but also, much more like, 'What in the world were we doing for 200 some years?' You know, I mean, it took this long to get to this point. But I'm fairly confident that over the next century, there'll be other African-Americans. There'll be presidents of other races. There'll be women presidents.

And so, Obama will be the pioneer -- the Jackie Robinson of presidents. And that can only deepen in its importance in time. I think that because a president has a special responsibility -- that most of them have tried to live up to in one way or another -- of representing the entire country, the fact that he's African-American, he never could and really never wanted to make that the central theme of his presidency, because he's the president for everyone.

And also, he had this special attribute of having a white part of his family as well. So, he was a crossover president in many important ways. I think that because of, what I call, the dissolution of
the American political fabric over the last 20 years, it complicated things.

He wasn't the first Democratic president to be hated by the right wing, but it clouded his presidency in a needlessly way -- the whole birther movement, you know, claiming that he was an alien, he wasn't one of us. He had to deal with that, and I think he dealt with it successfully and with many of the things that were being thrown at him. But history tends to reveal what's important and what's not. That will be seen in history as an ugly sideshow to the reality of his presidency.

He has walked a fine line, you know. Throughout his political career, he's had to deal with things coming at him from all sides -- with racism coming at him and also some measure of, if not hostility, scorn from a segment of the African-American community that thought he wasn't black enough.

That was true in Chicago when he was a state senator. Several of the other African-Americans in the Illinois legislature would criticize him for, you know, not being black enough, not supporting all of their measures, having too many white colleague friends. It was true when he ran for Congress the first time and was defeated by a former Black Panther Bobby Rush in 2000, who built his campaign on the notion that he, Rush, was a real black man and Obama wasn't.

And it was even true in his presidency with criticism from Cornel West, the intellectual, and others who sort of scorned Obama for not really being black enough in his politics. But I think he's worked his way through that and, again, history will diminish those criticisms.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: You mentioned this a bit earlier, too, but I'd love to come back to this idea that, especially early on in Obama's presidency, he used a lot of language about wanting to unite the country and this idea of, 'We're not red states and blue states, we're the United States.'

I think a lot of people would look around the country today, eight years after he took office, and say that the country feels very divided. Do you think that he failed in some way at that goal he had of uniting the country? Or is there something we're sort of missing about the work that he did that will take time for us to see the benefit of?

DAVID MARANISS: Well, I don't know if failed is the right word, but I think he would agree that he didn't succeed in uniting the country, and that it was perhaps naive of him to think that he could.

I think there are a lot of factors at work that were way deeper than anything that a president could resolve. There's always a longing to have perfection in a president and in a system, and democracy can never be perfect and nor can any human being.

So, Obama had certain flaws but a lot of forces larger than he is worked against his effort to to bring the country together. You know, starting at the base of pure racism, a lot of the reaction to him was simply that he was a black man. Then, the politics of the moment that created a stalemate from it for several years and only deepened what was already there in terms of the splintering of politics, which has been going on for quite a while.

Both, you know, especially -- I mean, in the country on one level and in Washington on another. It's pretty obvious that the relationships in Congress in the House and in the Senate between the two parties have really changed dramatically over the last 30 years -- much less collegiality, much
more posturing and hostility between the two parties.

There was very little that Obama could do to resolve that. You know, some people criticized him for not working out a grand bargain with Speaker of the House John Boehner at one point over a budget.

But there was enormous pressures from both sides that mitigated against that. And the whole 24-hour news cycle, the Internet, the way that people can get information on very narrow funnels and just what I consider a really unfortunate denigration of the search for truth and fact in American society -- all of these things worked against him.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: You know, that is something that comes up a lot -- just the difficulty that he had working with Congress. And I am really interested in trying to parse how much of that truly is a problem that absolutely any president right now would have versus, if there were actually parts of Obama's leadership style that didn't make him the best person to be able to forge those compromises?

DAVID MARANISS: You know, I think that there definitely were parts of his leadership style that didn't make him the best person for some of that. He did not reach out consistently and aggressively to Congress. You know, you can cite the examples of LBJ or Bill Clinton or Reagan working with Tip O'Neill as counterweights to what Obama was unable to do.

On the other hand, for better or worse, Obama was able to pass a piece of legislation -- the Affordable Care Act -- which had much more weight than anything Bill Clinton, who was a better schmoozer, was able to do. So, there's that balance as well. He did accomplish things.

But, you know, I say that every president's or politicians strengths are also their weaknesses. And Obama's strength was his self-confidence -- his lack of neediness -- and that also could work against him. Neediness can drive you to to compromise or to reach out to people in a way that he didn't feel he had to.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I know that assessing legacy is a very tricky game, even when a president has been out of office for a long time, so it's particularly tricky with Obama -- but would you mind just ticking through maybe the four or five things that you think -- even if we don't know quite yet whether for good or for ill -- will be the events or the policies, you know, the moments of his presidency that are remembered most -- discussed the most -- decades from now?

DAVID MARANISS: Well, the one that will be remembered the most is that he was the first black president. Overwhelming all of the policy, that will be it.

I think that on foreign policy, it's a mixed bag. He got elected promising to end two wars. To some degree, he did, but those wars in various other ways go on in the Middle East. He was unable to resolve the humanitarian and military crisis in Syria, and his use of drones is also something that will be discussed for many decades.

It was a way he saw of not exposing too many American soldiers to harm's way and fighting a war sort of antiseptically. But it also had moral consequences in terms of who was being killed and the right of political assassination, in a sense. So, I think that foreign policy will be an interesting debate.
I think in domestic policy, clearly the Affordable Care Act is the centerpiece, but he also in his first major budget deal he made, there were a lot of significant, under-the-radar changes that I think had long-term impact.

I think on the environment, he was unable to bring the country entirely around on climate change, but I think he became a strong voice for that during his presidency. I think that he might consider his major failure -- although it wasn't his alone -- was gun control and enormous number of mass shootings that took place during his administration and his inability to move the country in a direction towards gun control.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: The economic recession, do you think that'll be --

DAVID MARANISS: You know, economics is a tricky one because it doesn't necessarily last. I think, overall, Obama did an excellent job of bringing the economy back. But, you know, 20 years from now, how will you see that? It's more of a temporary gain, I think, than a permanent one.

It's hard to say who history is. I mean, who determines history? You know, is it the winners? Is historians? Is it objective? Is subjective?

I think that American life is becoming more and more subjective. But I do believe that there are many areas to criticize President Obama -- and more areas to see the positive work that he did.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, Obama is someone who seems to have given a lot of thought to his legacy. Throughout his presidency, he has invited historians to the White House, even early on in his presidency he talked about loving Doris Kearns Goodwin's book 'Team of Rivals' about Lincoln.

And then you wrote about how he wanted to be the liberal counter to Reagan in some ways, too. So, you know, now that we’re essentially at the end of his presidency, I’d love to hear which presidents you think he has most resembled, and if the type of president he wanted to be ended up being fairly close to the president he was?

DAVID MARANISS: Since you brought up Reagan, there sort of became a mythology about Ronald Reagan as the Republican ideal. And I think that more than any Democratic president since FDR, Obama will fill that role.

You see that in the way that Hillary embraced him this year. You'll see that for the foreseeable future. There were almost no scandals during his administration. You know, the Republicans tried to trump up things on Benghazi and solar energy or something. But it was really basically an incredibly clean administration.

So, there's not that part of embarrassment. He handled himself with dignity throughout his presidency. So, I think that, as a mythological creature apart from the reality, he will live on as the Democrat sometime in the future -- it won't be Jefferson or Jackson Day dinners, it'll be Barack Obama dinners at the Democratic Party.

So, I think he lived up to that part of his expectations. In terms of the actual policy, as I said, I think that's a little bit more of a mixed bag. You know, he did want to be more than a transitional figure, he wanted to be a great president. He made that clear from the beginning.
The fact that he's about to leave office with a higher favorability rating than almost any president in recent memory says something. It doesn't say everything, but I think one thing it shows is that there's an enormous amount of goodwill directed towards his efforts, even as people might disagree with certain parts of his policy.

And, you know, the 'Team of Rivals' -- I mean, he didn't actually do it. He might have liked the book, but he didn't set up a team of rivals in his presidency. It was pretty closed shop. I think that was the historian in Barack Obama and not the politician in Barack Obama.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I believe you said on the last episode, the last time you here, that great presidents -- great human beings -- evolve. I'd love to hear how you think Obama evolved over the eight years of his presidency.

DAVID MARANISS: I think he became a better president as he went on, partly because he didn't really have that national experience before he got into office. And so, there was a lot for him to learn. I think that that he did grow both in his confidence, in his assertiveness. He certainly was frustrated by some of the things he couldn't accomplish.

He figured ways around those, for better and worse. I mean, the Republicans would criticize him for using extra measures to try to accomplish certain things through executive power. But I think that he always had a sense that time was on his side -- that despite the frenetic nature of modern culture and the hysteria of the moment, whatever the breaking, superficial thing is of that day -- that in the longer course of time, things will settle out and common sense will prevail.

That was his core belief, and I think that as he grew and understood the powers of the presidency more, that played to his advantage and helped him become an even deeper human being.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Not that long ago, he made this comment where he said, 'If there's one wish I have for future presidents, it's not an imperial presidency. It's a functional, sensible, majority in opposition being able to make decisions based on facts and policy and compromise.'

Do you think that Obama did have an imperial presidency? And, I mean, even just when you look across the arc of American history, is it just becoming more and more imperial over time, do you think?

DAVID MARANISS: I don't know how much it's changed. I mean, early presidents did a lot of imperial things. So, you're more the historian of the entire presidency than I am, but I sort of think that human nature doesn't change, but the culture changes around it. And so, I think that it's just different.

I don't think it's better or worse in terms of the imperial presidency. You know, his statement is a pipe dream. That's the democratic ideal, which is never quite realized. Once in a while, it is for a moment -- and then things splinter again, in terms of rational debate and compromise. And, you know, it's possible that there'll be another era where that comes back. It seems unlikely in the near future.

So, he was hoping for something that didn't and couldn't happen. But part of democracy in the Republic is, you know, holding that ideal out there even if you can't reach it.
LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: To go back for one last thing to just the themes of race and unity. Today, in the country, there are a lot of very raw, difficult conversations that seem to have really boiled to the surface about race: the Black Lives Matter Movement, protests that were taking place in cities across the country. I'm just wondering if you see these as signs that the country is sort of feeling itself toward a better place, or if it is just a sign of divisions growing.

DAVID MARANISS: Well, I do see hope. I don't know if those are the signs of something hopeful. I think that whenever there's a certain amount of progress, there's also more frustration that it isn't reached.

But as someone who's written about race over a long period of time, I see the echoes and reverberations of it. I think that because President Obama is considered African-American that that leads to sort of a false sense that that means everything is better.

And he's not responsible for that and shouldn't be held responsible for that one way or another. But I do think that many of the the racial tensions of today are exacerbated by the fact of change in America -- that there's a feeling among white men, in particular, that they're losing out. They're fighting a retrograde action against the inevitable, and Barack Obama sort of came to represent that to some extent.

But I think that that is what's at the heart of this. Race has always been the American dilemma. And it still is. I think that it forces larger than than any of us are changing America in a positive way.

It's slow, but it's happening. And you know, as I said at the beginning, I think 50 years from now, we'll look back on this in a very different way.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: We'll end here with words from that night in Chicago in 2008 when Barack Obama learned he had just been elected the first black president of the United States.

BARACK OBAMA CLIP: This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations, but one that's on my mind tonight's about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She is a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election, except for one thing. Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old.

She was born just a generation past slavery -- a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky -- when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons because she was a woman and because of the color of his skin. And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America -- the heartache and the hope, the struggle and the progress, the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: 'Yes we can.'

At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. 'Yes, we can.' When there was despair in the Dust Bowl and Depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs, a new sense of common purpose. 'Yes we can.'

When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a
generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved -- 'Yes we can.'

She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma and a preacher from Atlanta who told the people that, 'We shall overcome. 'Yes, we can.'

A man touched down on the moon. A wall came down in Berlin. A world was connected by our own science and imagination. And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen and cast her vote because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. 'Yes, we can.'

America, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there's so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves, if our children should live to see the next century -- if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper -- what change will they see? What progress will we have made? This is our chance to answer that call.