

Transcript of Uncirculated Interview of
Illinois State Senator Barack Obama

Interviewer: Julieanna Richardson (J.D., Harvard Law School)
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Link to 25 recorded interview segments (registration required):
<http://www.idvl.org/thehistorymakers/Bio884.html>

This interview is significant for several reasons: it is the longest biographical interview of Barack Obama, it lends credibility to the assumptions and thesis in Stanley Kurtz's *Radical-In-Chief*, it lends support for Jack Cashill's thesis in *Deconstructing Obama*, and it contains provable falsehoods, inconsistencies and obfuscations. At the same time, it offers new insights into Obama's political ambitions and philosophy. When compared with other leaders in this interview series, it is striking how few specifics Obama provides about his childhood and college years. In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama (or Bill Ayers) chose his words about his childhood carefully, but this is Obama off-the-cuff.

Barron Sawyer, J.D.
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Table of Contents

DESCRIBES HIS FATHER'S BACKGROUND.....	3
DESCRIBES HIS MOTHER AND HER BACKGROUND.....	3
SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE DEFINING A RACIAL IDENTITY, PART I.....	5
SHARES HIS EARLIEST MEMORIES.....	6
EXPLAINS HIS MOTHER'S INVESTMENT IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.....	7
REFLECTS ON HIS YEARS IN INDONESIA AS A CHILD.....	8
DESCRIBES HIS ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR.....	9
SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE DEFINING A RACIAL IDENTITY, PART II.....	9
RECOUNTS HIS COLLEGE YEARS.....	11
RECALLS HIS EXPERIENCE AS A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER.....	11
RECALLS LAW SCHOOL AND THE BEGINNING OF HIS POLITICAL CAREER.....	13
EVALUATES HIS SUCCESS AS A LAW STUDENT.....	14
ASSESSES HIS LAW SCHOOL EDUCATION.....	14
DISCUSSES HIS EARLY EXPOSURE TO ELECTORAL POLITICS.....	15
REACTS TO PROCEEDINGS IN ILLINOIS STATE LEGISLATURE.....	16
REFLECTS ON THE HISTORIES OF LOCAL CHICAGO POLITICS AND ILLINOIS STATE POLITICS.....	18
CLASSIFIES A GENERATION OF YOUNG, BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS.....	20
EVALUATES THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN IMPROVING BLACK LIVES.....	21
CONSIDERS HIS LEGACY.....	22
CREDITS INFLUENTIAL FIGURES IN HIS LIFE.....	22
NAMES HIS FAVORITE FOOD.....	22
LISTS HIS OTHER FAVORITES.....	23

DESCRIBES HIS FATHER'S BACKGROUND

Julieanna Richardson (in italics): I want to start out by having you talk about your, your father [Barack Obama, Sr.] and what you know of him. And we'll let you start there.

Barack Obama: Okay. Well, my parents [Barack Obama, Sr. and Ann Dunham] met in Hawaii and I've got an unusual background. My father was from Kenya, from the east of Africa. He was from the Luo tribe and was the first generation in his family, not only to go to college, but to get any education whatsoever really. He grew up herding goats on my grandfather [Hussein Onyango Obama], his father's compound in Kenya, and was fortunate enough as an older child to get a scholarship to attend the British schools there--not with British students, but the schools that were run for African students in [Great] Britain, and that was a relatively small group that was able to attain that sort of education. He didn't go all the way through, but what happened was that he was able to, at some point, through the intervention of some Americans who were living in Kenya, obtain a scholarship to the University of Hawaii [Manoa, Hawaii], and this was right around the time of Kenyan independence--'62 [1962], '63 [1963], '61 [1961]. And so he was part of that first wave of young Africans to travel abroad, to travel to the West in significant numbers to get an education, and I think the notion was that they were going to come back to Africa after they had received their education and help redevelop or develop a modern Africa. So he arrived in Hawaii in 1959, late '59 [1959], which was right after statehood in Hawaii, and the University of Hawaii had offered him a scholarship, and that's where he met my mother [Ann Dunham] who--whose family had just moved to Hawaii from Seattle [Washington], but who were originally from Kansas. And they met in Russian class in the University of Hawaii and ended up getting married, having me. They separated fairly soon thereafter, after about two years. My father decided he wanted--he obtained a scholarship to go to Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts] to get this PhD and he moved there. But the strains in terms of separation made it difficult for them to stay together, not to mention, obviously, this was an interracial couple at the brink of the Civil Rights Movement, fairly early on, and I'm sure that the strains of that contributed to the separation as well. So I didn't really know my father growing up. He had left my mother by the time I was two and I didn't really meet him again until I was ten, and basically learned of him through the stories that my mother would tell and my grandparents [Stanley and Madelyn Dunham] would tell me.

Okay. Now your mother's side of the family. Can we talk more--oh, give us your father's name first.

My father's name was the same as mine, Barack Obama.

DESCRIBES HIS MOTHER AND HER BACKGROUND

My mother [Ann Dunham] was--was from Kansas and she was born to a pair of fairly typical Midwestern white Americans in a lot of ways. They weren't particularly wealthy or

sophisticated. My grandfather [Stanley Dunham] had worked in oil rigs before World War II, had fought in World War II, came back with the G.I. Bill and ended up getting some education, and then worked as a salesman for most of his life. My grandmother [Madelyn Dunham] completed high school, but basically married and raised my mother until she went back to work and ended up working her way up in a small bank. You know, they're prototypical, I think, Americans in a lot of ways. I mean what made them remarkable was that growing up in a relatively homogeneous society and with relatively parochial surroundings, you know, they ended up being more open-minded and accepting of difference and diversity than I think was maybe typical of their generation and their time, and that may be part of what drove them to Hawaii. They moved to Hawaii right before statehood, and I think in part saw it as a land of opportunity for them. And I also think that the exotic nature of Hawaii probably appealed to them because they were used to flatlands and cornfields. So one of the interesting things for me, when I first moved to Illinois, went down to Springfield [Illinois] and I drive around in areas in downstate Illinois, you know, in some ways, those are part of my roots as well, and I recognize sort of my mother's side of the family and a lot of farming communities and rural areas in Illinois because I don't think the culture is too different from the culture in Kansas.

Now your mother's name?

My mother's name was Ann Dunham, her maiden name.

And how would you describe your mother?

Well, I think, we all describe our mothers as saints, and she certainly was one. She was, you know, she was a fascinating woman. She, you know, was born in the early '40s [1940s] or mid '40s, but really came of age in the early '60s [1960s] and so, in some ways, was, I think, part of that generation that addressed issues of race and gender and the war [Vietnam War]. And it was part of that '60s generation that I think really opened up a lot of attitudes in this country, and I think she was an expression of that and a part of that. You know, in some ways, she was--not in some ways, I think she was very much the idealist and never really lost that idealism. I think there were times where she was naive in the sense that she didn't anticipate the difficulties involved in marrying a black man [Barack Obama, Sr.] or raising a black son, and I think was surprised sometimes by the deeply entrenched attitudes that existed in America. She ended up later in life living overseas quite a bit and I think, in part, that was because she was not entirely comfortable with some of the racism and xenophobia that existed in America. I think that disappointed her in some ways. But I think she was just a wonderfully sweet spirit and somebody who was at her core generous and sweet and thoughtful, and passed on a lot of values that I still care about, and somebody who rooted for the underdog, I think, and cared about people who weren't as lucky as she was. And I think that aspect of her is probably the thing that was her greatest gift to me because she had a terrific sense of empathy and built it as sort of step in somebody else's shoes and imagine how they might be feeling, and a terrific sense of compassion. And so I think that my interest in public service, in part, grew out of those early lessons that she taught me.

Do you think she was influenced, or how much was she influenced by growing up? Really, in many ways, she grew up in Hawaii.

Yeah.

Right?

Well, not really. I mean by the time she got to Hawaii she was about eighteen years old.

Oh, okay.

You know, so I think that what she was--a lot of her influence had to do with growing up sort of as an outsider. She moved around a lot when she was young because of my grandfather's sort of erratic career. They lived in Kansas, but then they moved to Oklahoma and Texas, and then they moved to Seattle [Washington]. And I think that for a lot of children, when you move around a lot, you don't feel a part of things. You're sort of outside looking in. And I think that influenced her a lot because I think when you have that outsider perspective, I think that makes you more sympathetic to other outsiders and makes you more thoughtful about the status quo. You know, you're not growing up and winning the popularity contest and, you know, hanging out with the cheerleaders and the quarterback of the football team. You know, you're constantly evaluating and analyzing your environment and the social structures that you're in, and I think that probably shaped her character more than anything.

SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE DEFINING A RACIAL IDENTITY, PART I

*There's been a lot of publicity on Rebecca Walker's new book [*Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*].*

Yeah.

And I was wondering your growing up, you know. Did you--what--you know, because you're basically raised in a white household. When did you become first--did you have any sense that you were different from, you know, your mother [Ann Dunham] and grandparents [Stanley and Madelyn Dunham] or anyone around you?

Well, keep in mind, first of all, the--Hawaii wasn't really a white environment. I mean Hawaii was sort of a unique kind of melting pot. You know, the myth of the American melting pot is true probably only in Hawaii in the sense that all the children around me were of some mixture, and so I was not unusual or untypical in Hawaii. And I think that created the buffer between myself and some of the immediate tensions or sense of doubt that might have existed had I been growing up in, let's say, a polarized society like Chicago [Illinois] or, you know, down South. And then when I was six, my mother remarried an Indonesian and we moved to Indonesia and I lived there for five years, so I was living overseas for a lot of those formative years, which certainly made me feel different, but it had more to do with the fact that I was an American living in a third world country than the fact that I was an African American. So, so

I don't think that there was a sense of my difference racially as I was growing up. It probably wasn't until I came back from Indonesia and I was around ten years old or so that it became an issue because, at that point, I obtained a scholarship to a prep school in Hawaii [Punahou School, Honolulu, Hawaii]. Children, at that point, you know, when you're around ten or eleven, they're starting to come into puberty, you know, the boys are starting to, you know, get more into packs and you start thinking about the opposite sex and so--you start thinking about identity as you go into adolescence. And so, at that point, suddenly I looked around and said, you know, "There aren't that many folks who look like me." And that was also at a time when 'Roots' was first appearing on television and, you know, I think that, although I had been overseas during a big chunk of the '60s [1960s], by the early '70s [1970s], you know, there were just a lot of, you know, icons of black identity, not just 'Roots,' but 'Shaft' and 'Superfly' and, you know, the music of our generation. And so that forced, you know, I think, me to examine more carefully and more closely sort of who I was and where I stood in the world, you know, and forced me to figure out, as I moved through high school and then later in college, that what did it mean to be a black man in America and, you know, what role models were available to me to make sure that I was sort of living up to, you know, sort of a notion of being an African American that could also embrace, you know, my mixed heritage.

SHARES HIS EARLIEST MEMORIES

I want to go back to even, you know, what your earliest memory was. You know, do you-- what is your earliest memory?

My earliest memory. My earliest memory is running around in the backyard gathering up mangoes that had fallen from the mango tree and it was in our backyard when I was five-- when I was probably four, and eating mangoes with family and friends in, in our back porch.

And are there any other memories you would like to sort of share? I mean your book ['Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance'] is very--I mean it's a great book, Barack--.

Well, thanks. I appreciate that.

It's beautifully written.

Yeah. Well, you know, I think that, you know, as I wrote about in the book, 'Dreams From My Father,' which is really sort of an exploration of my father [Barack Obama, Sr.] and my mother [Ann Dunham] and what legacy they left me, I think a lot of my early memories are sort of an almost idyllic sort of early childhood in Hawaii where there weren't many things to worry about, and I think everybody's childhood, to some degree, is like that. But when you're living in Hawaii, your memories are going to the beach and fishing and, you know, running around in eighty-five degree weather. And--but then I--and then my memories of Indonesia are very much sort of wonderful memories of an exotic country, very different from the United States, full of, you know, unusual sights and sounds and smells. What I touch on in the book are sort of my earliest memories of my father's absence, which probably doesn't

really start affecting me until I'm maybe seven or eight years old. And memories of, at that point, starting to recognize that he's absent and that he's an African, and being much more attuned then to stories of Africa and the Civil Rights Movement. And my mother really was somebody who, I think, empathized so deeply or identified so greatly with the Civil Rights Movement that that was almost our civil religion, you know, that she was constantly talking about [Dr. Martin Luther] King [Jr.] and Malcolm [X] and the struggles that were taking place in the United States. And so a lot of my memories have to do with sort of connecting up the struggle for African American freedom with the struggle for freedom in Africa, and then with my father. I think all those things became connected in my mind, and I suspect had something to do with my interest then in public service and politics and civil rights law subsequently.

EXPLAINS HIS MOTHER'S INVESTMENT IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Why do you think your mother [Ann Dunham] was--why did she sort of naturally gravitate to that [the Civil Rights Movement]? I mean, it's not like she was married to a, you know, an African American.

Right.

You know, she was married to someone who was a foreigner [Barack Obama, Sr., a Kenyan].

Right.

And I'm just wondering why do you think she sort of gravitated and that sort of captivated?

Well, you know, I think that, you know, if you think back to the early 60s [1960s], you know, I was very young, but when you look at the history of it, you know, the African American struggle was very much connected to the human rights struggle internationally in Pan-Africanism. And, you know, [Dr. Martin Luther] King [Jr.]'s inspiration was [Mohandas K.] Gandhi, you know. Malcolm [X] drew inspiration from [Kwame] Nkrumah and [Jomo] Kenyatta and to the struggles that were taking place a continent away. So, you know, I think, during that time there was a sense that the Civil Rights Movement was just part of this larger movement of black and brown peoples taking on their own destiny, and also, I think, maybe the notion at the core of the early Civil Rights Movement as sort of an integrationist vision where people of different colors and different cultures were able to live together in some semblance of peace and harmony. I think that spirit of the early 60s [1960s] is what moved her. I think, you know, she came of age during that time, and so I think a lot of times when you first see yourself as an adult, you know, the surrounding environment and experiences in which you find yourself as an adult end up being, you know, having a lot to do with shaping who you are, and I think that's what happened to her.

REFLECTS ON HIS YEARS IN INDONESIA AS A CHILD

That whole experience [living in Indonesia during his childhood]--what would you say, in hindsight, what impact did that have? 'Cause it was like being--it's totally different.

Well, I had--it was a--I think it had a tremendous impact on me. I mean, I went there when I was six. This was about a year--this was in 1967, so this was a year after Indonesia had gone through a huge purge of what were purported to be communist sympathizers and the military government had taken over and probably half a million to seven hundred and fifty thousand people had been killed during this purge. The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] had supported the military coming in. It was a country that was on the other side of the world with a completely different culture, about as foreign a culture as you can get from the United States, and it's also the largest Islamic country in the world. And so, suddenly, I was out in paddy fields playing with Asian children who were predominantly Muslim, in a country governed by the military, and, you know, we lived literally beside what were called 'kampongs,' which were, you know, small villages without running water or electricity, and I had a great time. I mean, it was--for a child it was a wonderful experience. You know, you'd be running out with water buffalo and, you know, monkeys in the trees, and terrific excitement. Now this again was a country that had achieved independence from the Dutch only a few years earlier and so they were coming out of colonial experience. And I think that probably the greatest effect it had on me was, number one, I think it reinforced my general belief that under the skin, people were the same at some level. I think it reinforced this notion that whatever circles I travelled in I could find a common spirit or a common ground. It also though taught me, I think, to be very aware about issues of class and injustice and oppression because this was a country like many third world countries that had huge gulfs between rich and poor--that those gulfs didn't really have to do with merit, but had to do with power or circumstance. You know, you'd see beggars on the streets with nothing and then generals in homes with five or six or ten cars, and so I think it made me acutely aware of the degree to which economic power and political power and social power can be skewed. And not because the poor were less deserving or the wealthy were smarter or more able, you know, but simply because they had been craftier, stronger or luckier, or more ruthless. And I think--so that probably reinforced a general suspicion of inequality and power and the corrupt uses of power and the desire to make things fair. And I think my mother's [Ann Dunham] living there had those same frustrations in what she had observed. She ended up working as a development officer for international aid organizations and so was often times working with people who were trying to bring about social change in Indonesia and in other countries later on. And I think again that probably dove-tailed with my interest in the Civil Rights Movement and what was happening in the United States. You know, I think that I had--as a consequence of living in Indonesia, I have a tendency to look at the problems facing African Americans in the United States, in part, as a unique problem of race, but also as a broader problem of political and economic injustice and disparities and opportunity that are related to class and history, and so that the racism in the United States is just one expression of sort of a broader set of injustices that you see around the world.

DESCRIBES HIS ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR

What was the young Barack like? You know, what were you like and, you know, everyone has their dreams or aspirations, you know, but what were your--?

You know, **I think I was a thug (laughs) for a big part of my growing up.** I was--I think I was a very typical, gregarious, **mischievous** child as a young boy. I think by the time I was an adolescent and had moved back [to Hawaii] from Indonesia and was struggling with these issues of racial identity and a father not being in the house, I think that, you know, **I reacted by engaging in a lot of behavior that's not untypical of black males across the country, you know. I played a lot of basketball. I didn't take school that seriously. I got into fights. I drank and did--and consumed substances that weren't always legal.** And, you know, I think, generally was acting out in ways that when I look back on it, I understand. I think that what got me through those years was sort of a natural aptitude for schooling, which meant that I didn't have to pay attention too much to be able to keep my grades up and at least graduate. And I think the core values that my mother [Ann Dunham] had given me as a young child stayed with me constantly even through those periods so, you know, I didn't--I was never--didn't have a vicious edge to, you know, what I was doing. **Some of my behavior was self-destructive, you know. I might have drunk a six-pack in an hour before going back to class, things like that, but it wasn't directed negatively towards other people. I was never involved in violent activity or a mean behavior towards kids,** and I think that had to do with sort of the core values that my mother had established. And, and so, I think it was those earlier values that then returned to me or I reaffirmed, once I got into college, and started really thinking more serious about who I was and what I wanted to be.

SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE DEFINING A RACIAL IDENTITY, PART II

You could have very well been sort of in many ways the Tiger Woods in your viewpoint on things. There was no reason that you had to sort of--while society was more labeling you as an African--you know, as black--.

Right.

I mean you could have said that 'I'm something', you know.

Right.

And I'm just wondering this whole thing of being sort of this between these cultures--,

Right.

How were--I mean why did you gravitate to that?

Right.

Because society told you that--,

You know, no. Actually, the pressures on me to strongly identify with the African American community were probably not as great as they would have been if I had been growing up in Chicago [Illinois], right. You know, if you're growing up in Hawaii, then people are more than happy to take you as however you want to define yourself. So, you know, there aren't that many pressures to align yourself tribally one way or the other. You know, I think--I'm sure that part of it had to do with the sense that my mother [Ann Dunham] had inculcated in me, which was being African American was a wonderful thing, you know, that it was special in some way. That the project we were engaged in that was transforming the country was a proud legacy to be a part of. So it's ironic, you know, that I got this wonderful sort of black history lesson from this white woman from Kansas, but I think that--so part of it was never being maybe burdened with the sense of that somehow being African American was something to shy away from. It was something to embrace. You know, and part of that also had to do with my father [Barack Obama, Sr.], you know. Despite his absence, he had left such a mark on my mother and my grandparents [Stanley and Madelyn Dunham] and family and friends that knew him, you know, their consensus was he was the smartest man they had ever met, you know. So the image that I had of being a black American was almost exclusively positive. That's--I had positive associations, and I think that played a part in it, and I think that part of it was a general suspicion, which I continue to have today, that for persons of mixed race to spend a lot of time insisting on their mixed race status touches on a fear that--well, I think it's related to the same reason that, you know, in the history of African American culture, you know, people have been color- struck or, you know, had been worried about whether they've got light skin or good hair, or when you go to the Caribbean that the ruling classes are the mulattoes or the octaroons. And I think that there's a history among African Americans who are by definition a hybrid culture themselves, that somehow if you're whitened a little bit that somehow makes you better, and, you know, that's always been a distasteful notion to me and I think--now that's not to say that I think that for those persons, you know, who are mixed race, who, you know, feel a genuine struggle in terms of not wanting to deny one set of parents, that I'm not sympathetic to that. But I guess what it is, to me, defining myself as an African American already acknowledges my hybrid status. We're a hybrid people, we're a hybrid culture. You know, I always like to talk about the first time I took my wife [Michelle Obama] to Kenya, and my wife is, you know, from the South Side of Chicago [Illinois]--born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, you know, considers herself thoroughly African American. But when we took her to Kenya the people would ask her, so, "You know, which one of your parents is white?" And it shocked her, right. "I mean why would you think that one of my parents is white?" You know, and she's a chocolate brown woman, but what the Africans were seeing was her Americanness, her Westernness in how she dressed, how she acted, her wealth relative to what they possessed. And so I think it was a useful reminder for her of how American African Americans are. You know, our experience is different here and we see different things, but we're a hybrid culture. And so what that means is then, you know, I don't have to go around advertising that I'm of mixed race to acknowledge those aspects of myself that are European. You know, they're already self-apparent and they're in the definition of me being a black American.

Okay. Well, you know, I think that actually is very well-stated and it's interesting that, you know, this whole thing that with a white mother, as you said, made you love things, you know, so that you didn't--and also, the issue of you growing up in, you know, a place that had so many different cultures so brown wasn't necessarily bad.

Yeah, yeah. I mean, you know, and I do think that it is tougher for children of mixed race in a much more polarized environment, I think. And you can imagine a child of mixed race going to an elementary school where, you know, there's a lot of racial turnover or racial tensions, or the need to choose sides occurs very early on, and there's a lot of residential segregation, so-- which is why I say, although I'm suspicious of, you know, attitudes that would deny our blackness, I'm sympathetic to sort of the pressures that I think young people go through in those situations.

RECOUNTS HIS COLLEGE YEARS

If you could just take your time from high school [Punahou School, Honolulu, Hawaii], you know--,

Sort of just give a chronology.

Right, right, right, right.

Well, when I got out of high school, I received a scholarship to Occidental College in Los Angeles [California], and that was the first time that I spent a lot of time on the mainland of the United States, and spent the first two years there sort of rediscovering what was important to me. I mean it turned out that I really liked to read and I liked to argue politics with my professors, and liked engaging in questions of public policy, and I really, sort of like a sponge, started soaking up a lot of information. I became close to a collection of African American professors and, you know, Latino activists and, you know, African Americans and international students. And so it was a terrific period of growth for me. After two years at Occidental College though, it was a small liberal arts college in L.A., I decided that I needed to change. A lot of my friends were older and so they had graduated, so I transferred to Columbia University in New York City [New York] and ended up obtaining my bachelor's degree there, and continued to, you know, really study deeply. I majored in political science with a minor in English and became, you know, very interested in issues of social change in politics and public policy and government, and was active in a lot of campus activism. At that time, the main issues that we were dealing with were the apartheid and divestment movements relating to South Africa, and so I was a leader on those issues both at Occidental and at Columbia.

RECALLS HIS EXPERIENCE AS A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

I decided, upon graduation [from Columbia University, New York, New York], that I wanted to continue in that kind of work [political activism]. So I--for a year I worked as a financial journalist to pay off my student loans and as soon as I had those paid off, I started looking for work as a community organizer or political activist or something that was going to lead me into that area of work. And it turned out that it was actually harder to find work doing good than I had expected. It's an irony of this country that it's actually easier to find a paying job, you know, just to make money than it is to try to find a job that involves social change in some fashion. But there were a small group of churches on the far South Side of Chicago [Illinois] that were experiencing tremendous pressure because the steel mills in the area had closed, people were losing jobs, there was a lot of racial turnover. This would be in places like Roseland and West Pullman [Chicago, Illinois]. And these churches had decided to get together, form an organization, raise a small budget and try to hire somebody who could staff a community organization that would help them with these problems. And they only had a small budget, so they could only afford to pay somebody thirteen thousand dollars a--thirteen thousand dollars a year. And it just so happened that I saw an advertisement that they had placed in a community newspaper and wrote to them and they agreed to hire me. So I drove out to Chicago not knowing a single person in Chicago. I was--this would have been 1985 and so I was twenty-four years old, and ended up serving as the director of this community organization for three and a half years, and it was the best education of my life because it allowed me to not only learn some of the skills of organizing and politics that I still apply today in my career, but, more importantly, it gave me a home--it gave me a base. It sort of rooted me in a specific community of African Americans whose, you know, values and stories I soaked up and found an infinity with. And we did some good in this organizing work. You know, we were able to set up job training programs and college counseling and education programs for youth, cleaned up vacant lots, brought more money into neighborhood parks, worked on school reform issues, trained a cadre of neighborhood leaders that are still active in that area and so, overall, it was a wonderful experience and, you know, difficult. When I think back to me being twenty-four and working mostly with women and men and pastors who were my parents' age or grandparents' age, not really knowing anything about Chicago, not knowing that much about the church, I was pretty green behind the ears. But they, I think the community appreciated my efforts even if sometimes they weren't always as effective or as efficient as if I had had a little more experience, and it ended up being a wonderful training ground for me. After about three and a half years of doing that work, I became more keenly aware of the fact that it was--it was going to be difficult though to bring about the kind of change that I was concerned about by working at such a local level. The problems of joblessness or drug violence or the failures of the public education system, all those decisions weren't just being made locally and they didn't just track particular neighborhood boundaries. They were citywide issues, statewide issues, national issues. So I became more aware of the need for me to step back and be able to evaluate and analyze these issues at a larger level and a larger scale, and potentially have more power to shape the decisions that were affecting those issues. And, in addition, you know, the years during which I was organizing, those were the years that [Mayor] Harold Washington was in office and [city] 'Council Wars' was going on here in Chicago. And part of the reason, I think, I had been attracted to Chicago was reading about Harold Washington, and I think the inspiration that African Americans across the country had taken from his election as the first African American mayor in Chicago. And Harold died in '87 [1987] after I had been organizing for about three years, and, you know,

you just got a sense that the city was going to be going through a transition. That the kinds of organizing work that I was doing wasn't going to be the focal point of people's attention because, you know, there were all these transitions and struggles and tumult that was going on in terms of the African American community figuring where to go next. And so I decided it was a good time for me to pull back and I went to law school at Harvard [Harvard Law School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts].

RECALLS LAW SCHOOL AND THE BEGINNING OF HIS POLITICAL CAREER

Spent three years [at Harvard Law School, Harvard University] in Cambridge, Massachusetts continuing the same line of questioning that I had been engaging in as a community organizer, you know, how do we bring about more just society? You know, what are the institutional arrangements that would give people opportunity? But--and ended up being fortunate enough to be very successful at Harvard, and so I was elected as the first African American president of the law review at Harvard ['The Harvard Law Review'], and ended up generating a lot of publicity as a consequence of that, part of which, I think, has to do with just the mythology that Harvard has in America and Harvard Law School, in particular. And that put me in a position where leaving law school, I pretty much could write my own ticket. And I decided that I was pretty sincere about those earlier interests in organizing and politics and--so sort of decided not to take what might have been the more conventional route with those kinds of credentials of clerking on the Supreme Court and either working on Capitol Hill [Washington, DC] or, you know, coming back [to Chicago, Illinois] and working in a large law firm. You know, I ended up going to a small civil rights firm with the former corporation counsel of [Mayor] Harold Washington, Judson Miner. I ended up directing a project called Project Vote that registered a hundred and fifty thousand new voters for the 1992 elections, and that's really how I started to make a lot of connections with political electoral--the electoral system. Because when I was organizing, I was always pretty suspicious of politicians and politics. You know, we used to take bus loads of people to beat up on, you know, aldermen and state senators and state legislators who we felt weren't being particularly responsive to the community. And it was when I started doing Project Vote in 1992 that I started meeting a lot of political operatives and elected officials around the city and around the state, and came to appreciate the need for a more effective political movement within the African American community, the need to mobilize around an agenda and not just around individuals. One of the lessons that organizing during Harold Washington's time had taught me was the perpetual longing in our community for a Messiah who's just going to deliver us from all our problems--sort of a charismatic leader-based politics. And when Harold died tragically [1987], there was no organization there, nothing, no agenda that was clearly articulated around which we could re-mobilize and re-energize ourselves, and I think that continues to be a problem in terms of our politics. And part of the reason, I think, that I ultimately not only got involved in voter registration and education activities, but then later on ran for office was because I really feel like we have to shape an agenda that a collective leadership can pursue, that elected officials can work with, business can work with, community folks can work with, teachers or homemakers, but everybody is invested in an agenda that we're moving forward as opposed to just invested in one person's particular political career.

EVALUATES HIS SUCCESS AS A LAW STUDENT

I want to go back to law school [Harvard Law School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]--there--you were like a fish that sort of found water in many ways. Why do you think you met with so much success there?

You know, I think partly because I was an older student. I was twenty-seven when I got to law school and a lot of my classmates were twenty-three, twenty-four. Those three years don't seem like a lot, but it meant that I had gotten a lot of errant energy out of the way. I had sowed my wild oats. I had worked, so that meant when I went back to law school, the idea of reading a book didn't seem particularly tough to me. Going home and spending your time reading didn't seem like a great sacrifice or struggle whereas I think a lot of twenty-three and twenty-four year olds, especially those who have come straight out of college, were feeling tired and burdened by the whole thing. I was excited about it. Here's an opportunity for me to read and reflect and study for as much as I wanted. That was my job. So part of it was, I think, that I was an older student. I had great enthusiasm for the subject matter because I think the law, when studied deeply, is really the intersection of so many disciplines. It's the intersection of politics and economics and philosophy, ethics, so I just found the subject matter interesting. And I think when you're interested in something, you end up doing well on it. And part of it probably had to do with the fact that I had learned as an organizer to be able to articulate a position and express myself in clear ways that served me well as a law student and, ultimately, as a lawyer as well. You know, in some ways, working as a community organizer, my whole job was persuading people to do things differently, but not being able to pay them, so I had to be pretty persuasive, and I think it taught me to be able to focus in on those issues that were important to people and be able to describe them in ways that people found compelling, and I think that probably had something to do with my success at law school. And finally, for whatever reason, I think partly just because of my mother [Ann Dunham] and my upbringing and spending a lot of time reading, you know, I had developed into a very good writer. And, you know, I think that in almost every discipline outside of the maths and the sciences, you know, if you write well, that gives you a big advantage. And I would argue, in fact, that probably the biggest disadvantage that I see among African American students now, now that I teach in the law schools [The University of Chicago, The Law School, Chicago, Illinois] is, is the writing skills.

ASSESES HIS LAW SCHOOL EDUCATION

What do you feel that you got out of the law school experience [at Harvard Law School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]? I mean obviously you did very well there.

Right.

But what did you get out of that?

Well, you know, part of what a law school education, especially at Harvard, does is it just credentials you. And I think that I could say the exact same thing that I said before law

school or after law school and people would think it sounded better just because now it was coming from a Harvard-trained lawyer. But I do also think that it provides a certain discipline to how you analyze problems and how you think about issues and how you express arguments. That is helpful. I mean it makes you more effective as an advocate, I think, than you otherwise would have been. I think that what happens to a lot of law students is that they go in however and in the process of receiving this training, also lose track of their ideals and their motivations and the deeper concerns that they have. And that's one of the advantages, I think, that I had going in as an older student was that I knew why I was there and what I wanted to get out of it. I think for some younger students, I think, they got turned around because they went into law school envisioning that they were going to be working on behalf of important social issues and found that they were only being trained to work as corporate attorneys.

And Barack, but people probably thought you were crazy, too. I mean here you're the first black president of the, you know, law review ['Harvard Law Review'] and you get a lot of press, like you were saying over it.

Right.

And then you choose to come to this small, you know, firm [Miner, Barnhill & Galland] in Chicago [Illinois] when, like you said, you could have written your ticket.

Yeah. Yeah, you know, I remember being interviewed on National Public Radio [NPR] about a year after I had been elected and I explained how that was my intention that I was going to go back to Chicago and probably work in civil rights. And the interviewer asked me, "Well, why are you doing that?" And I said, "One of the things that I think a Harvard law degree confers is the ability to take risks because you're going to land on your feet if things don't work out." I wasn't in a situation where not going to a big corporate firm was going to risk me being able to support a family. You know, I might be making half of what I could be making in other jobs, but that half was still more than ninety-five percent of what the country makes. So, you know, the sacrifices that I was making by pursuing an unconventional career coming out of Harvard is nothing like the sacrifices that Thurgood Marshall had to make or Charles Hamilton Houston had to make, or, you know, the Freedom Riders had to make, you know. You're not risking life and limb, you know, you're just risking not being able to retire at the age of forty, right. That's not much of a sacrifice.

DISCUSSES HIS EARLY EXPOSURE TO ELECTORAL POLITICS

You come back to Chicago [Illinois]. You, you know, get involved with, you said, Project Vote at that time.

(Simultaneously) Project Vote.

What was, what was significant about Project Vote that was different from what you had done, you know, previously with, you know, being the executive director of that organization?

What was different? And then I'm really curious about this, you know, contemplating a political career.

Well, as I said, when I was an organizer, I really wasn't focused on electoral politics. Partly that was because [Chicago, Illinois Mayor] Harold Washington was in office and all politics in the African American community flowed from Harold's office in the sense that if an alderman wanted to be re-elected, they needed to get Harold's endorsement. If they didn't get Harold's endorsement and the challenger got Harold's endorsement, then that challenger was going to win. You know, if you think about a lot of the political careers of people now, whether it's [U.S. Congressman] Bobby Rush, [U.S. Congressman] Danny Davis, [Alderswoman] Dorothy Tillman, you know, a huge number of current African American leadership were essentially established because they worked on Harold's campaign and he gave them support. And so one of the--so during that period, you know, I wasn't that involved in the mechanics of the political process in Chicago. Now when I came back and started running Project Vote and voter registration drives, that immersed me, I think, in the mechanics of the political process. How do you get people registered, how do you turn them out to the polls, you know, how do precinct operations work, how do ward operations work? And so I think it was a useful education for me in learning how politics work, and it also created a range of relationships that I carry on to this day with elected officials and political activists around the city that I hadn't known when I was still organizing.

REACTS TO PROCEEDINGS IN ILLINOIS STATE LEGISLATURE

You're elected. This is your first time out being, you know, you've run for the first time, you're elected. What--and you now are on your way to Springfield [Illinois]. What is that? What was the experience? Because Springfield is its own animal.

Yeah.

And what did you experience? You know, what were your perceptions and what--how did those perceptions differ from what you experience?

You know, in some ways, Springfield was exactly what I expected. I had gone down there to visit before I made the decision to run and had spent a couple of days down there. Obviously, that didn't give me an entire understanding of how things worked. But I think there were some aspects of Springfield that were what I expected and I appreciated about Springfield. The first is that Springfield is as good a microcosm of the entire country as we have, and that partly is because Illinois itself is a microcosm of the country. You know, it's southern and northern, it's eastern and western, it's rural and urban, it's black, white, Hispanic. It's agricultural, it's manufacturing. You know, all the pieces and components of this country, I think, converge in Illinois, and Springfield is an expression of that. If you walk under the dome, you will see every type of character and every facet of human life represented there, and that's a wonderful thing. I was impressed by the degree to which almost all my colleagues uniformly really do try to represent their constituents as best they can. I was pleased to see that. You know, I think that there's a tendency to believe that legislators down

there are ignoring their constituents and they're just serving special interest. And, for the most part, I think that legislators in Springfield genuinely are trying to represent their constituents as best they can. What I was disappointed by were--was, number one, the degree of control that leadership exerted over the process by the time I arrived, and that was something that was a relatively recent development. But by the time I arrived, you had a divided legislature, a Republican controlled senate and a Democratically-controlled house [of representatives]. And the rules had been structured within each chamber in such a way that essentially the speaker of the house and the president of the senate had almost exclusive power, in fact, exclusive power to control the flow of legislation and to control the debate. They could let bills out of committee if they wanted. If it was a bill that they didn't want heard, they could just bottle it up. It wouldn't even go to committee. You wouldn't even get a debate much less get a vote. Votes were almost unimportant issues, or polarizing issues were almost exclusively on party lines. You very rarely saw on controversial issues any kind of thoughtful independent voting, and I think all that was a detriment to the political process. It meant that you had a lot of jockeying and gamesmanship between the two parties focused on whether leadership would retain control and not much room in the middle for parties to negotiate and, you know, craft solutions to the problems that we're actually facing, the people of Illinois. That was disappointing and frustrating for somebody like myself who was down there to work and discovered that most of my bills were going to get killed before they had even been debated. You know, I think that is not something that I anticipated, and it continues to be a frustration for myself as somebody who's in the minority party in the senate. But my concern is I'd like to think that I would be equally concerned if I was in the majority as well because I think that it does the public a disservice when ideas are not fully debated and aired and (unclear) and then voted on, and no party has an exclusive monopoly on good ideas. So that surprised me. You know, I was surprised, I guess, at the degree to which lobbyists, particularly for money interests, had influence over the details of the legislative process. People probably overestimate the power of lobbyists and special interest on big well-publicized issues. The reason for that is because, ultimately, what any elected official really cares about is what their constituents think. So if there's a big controversial issue, whether it's abortion or vouchers for public schools or what have you, typically the legislators are going to vote their district. But probably nine-tenths of the legislation that we deal with is highly technical, unspectacular issues that affect people in ways that aren't immediately apparent. It's a change in a sentence in the tax code that gives a particular industry a huge tax break, but nobody really is paying attention to it. It might be a modification in a regulation that makes it more difficult for a consumer to pursue a complaint against a manufacturer. It's those kinds of issues where, you know, lobbyists exert a great deal of control, and it's not so much because of campaign financing, although that plays something of a role. It has more to do with just that they have the capacity to sustain their position down there because they're paying attention to it and nobody else is, and they're better informed about the issue than anybody else is. Which, I guess, brings me to the third thing that surprised me about Springfield, and that is how little the public pays attention to Springfield. You know, I didn't realize how much people, to the extent that they think about government at all, think either in local terms about their alderman because that's the person who picks up the garbage and makes sure that the snow is removed, or they think about their congressman just because that's the person that they see on C-Span or TV, but they have very little awareness of state government. That's--now that's to some degree uniquely a Chicago [Illinois] problem because

if you go to downstate Illinois, they're much more keenly aware of the impact that state government has on their lives. But here in Chicago, I think that we don't realize that state government spends 46 billion dollars this year, that policies related to public school financing, Medicare, Medicaid, most of the big ticket government items that are provided to people are provided by state government, that the entire criminal code and how we treat the criminal justice system is determined at the state level. People don't pay attention to it. And, in some ways, that, I think, makes life easier on a lot of legislators here in Chicago because, as long as they don't involved themselves in scandal, it's very hard for a challenger to mount a challenge against an incumbent legislator. But the flip side of it is, is that if you are hoping to move a significant agenda forward, it's not enough for you to be right because you don't have the court of public opinion to appeal to because nobody's listening to you. You're crying in the wind. And for me, that's frustrating, I think, because there are often times where I'm in debates in Springfield where my opponents will acknowledge that my position is the right one, at least privately, but there's nothing that I can do to change their votes. In fact, I remember the first time I spoke on the floor of the Senate--I forget what issue it was, but it was an issue that I was relatively passionate about--I stood up, made a pretty rousing speech in opposition to the bill, and looked up at the board when the vote was taken and, I think, I was one of three people who had voted against the bill. And one of my Republican colleagues came up to me and said, "You know, Barack, that was a wonderful speech. I think you changed a lot of minds, but you changed no votes." And I think that's what happens when the public is not paying attention. You can change people's minds, you can be right on the merits, you can be right from a policy perspective, but if people aren't paying attention to the process, then what will prevail, ultimately, will be who's got the most power, who's got the money or the influence or the leverage to move the issue forward as opposed to who's on the right side of the debate.

REFLECTS ON THE HISTORIES OF LOCAL CHICAGO POLITICS AND ILLINOIS STATE POLITICS

There's this period from 1960 to 1980--,

Right.

That what Charles [Chew] talks about is that there's this period where they [black Illinois legislators] are propelled forward the--because of the whole movement, the Civil Rights Movement. That they, on their own account, wouldn't have moved, but it's the whole what is happening in the nation, happening in Chicago [Illinois] that moves them. Then it's the period that you guys fit in, which is starting in 1980, you know, but with people like Harold Washington though, he started out, you know, in the--as part of the machine.

Right.

You know, are more independent people.

Right.

And they view, you know, you view yourselves as independent in representing your ward.

Right.

And not part of any sort of any group, so to speak.

Right.

And so that--but I was wondering if you have, you know, I say all that to say, and if you have an answer to this, fine. If you don't, don't worry about it. But you do have a sense--because we're trying to sort of talk about--,

Link all these stories together.

Right, right.

Do I have a sense just generally about--

You know, do you have a sense of the history?

The history, right.

And why that history is sort of important?

Right, sure. Well, I think we have gone through a transition in phases, and I think that how African American legislators think about themselves is different today than it was thirty years ago or forty years ago. I think there is less of a sense that African American legislators are simply part of the Democratic machine and that they're cogs in the wheel, and that they're taking orders from the fifth floor in terms of how to vote. I think that's all for the good. My impression is, is that this generation of African American legislators is still in transition though. That it hasn't fully found its voice yet. **And part of it is because the African American community in Chicago [Illinois] hasn't fully found its voice yet, or recovered it since the years that Harold Washington died [1987].** And not to sound like a broken record, but I think it goes back to the fact that we don't have a well-defined agenda in terms of what are the issues that we might move forward. And I think that's true not just of Chicago, but I think nationally. You know, we have a personality-driven politics as opposed to an agenda-driven politics. And I think that when you look at those groups that are able to accomplish significant things through the political process, it's not because of the charisma of any particular leader, but it's because they have a clear agenda. Certainly, that's how the business community operates. You know, they are dogged in pursuit of a particular agenda. So, you know, I think that the struggle for us today is how do we function as independents and not part of a political machine and, yet, how do we work in an interdependent fashion to move an agenda forward. And I'm not sure that we've arrived at the precise formula for that yet.

And why--you talk about the fact that people don't know, you know, it's not close to them, they don't know, you know, downstate [southern Illinois] people don't even have a clue really what goes--.

Right.

I mean some now--there's been more awareness of it because of the school controversy and things like that--and [the] United Center [Chicago, Illinois]. But why should people pay attention to the state legislation? I mean why--I'm asking the question in the inverse. Why should they pay attention?

Well, because most of their tax dollars that have a direct impact on their lives, in some fashion, are funneled through the state and state laws have a more direct impact on regulating our lives than probably every level of government. Certainly, state government has much more influence on the day-to-day lives of people than the federal government does. And what's also true is that we deal with policy issues that city government has nothing to do with. So if you're thinking about the most important policy questions, whether it's education, economic policy, crime, drugs, whatever the issue is--health care, most of the debate, most of the action is happening at the state level. And I think that's a process that's going to be accelerating more and more as time goes on. You know, part of the agenda that started under Ronald Reagan but continued under [President William J.] Bill Clinton was the whole notion of devolution, and sending more federal power back to the states. More often than not, if you're sending your tax dollars to the federal government, after they take out for social security, defense department [U.S. Department of Defense] and Medicare, that money typically will come back to the state in the form of block grants for various programs, and it's the state that determines how those programs are going to be run. So, you know, the impact and influence on the people's lives at the state level is enormous, and I would argue that we're probably not maximizing the benefits that we could be receiving from the state because we don't pay attention to it and we don't hold our elected officials accountable.

CLASSIFIES A GENERATION OF YOUNG, BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS

People describe you as sort of a new type of black politician, and what do they mean by that when they say that? Do you know? Do you--?

You know, part of it is probably just generational. I am one of only a handful of reasonably prominent African American elected officials who are under the age of forty, although, by the time your viewers see this video, I may not be able to qualify. But, you know, part of it is that there tends to be a gap, I think, between the generation that got involved in politics during the Civil Rights Movement, who are now in their fifties and early sixties and persons of my generation or younger, who really haven't stepped forward that much to get involved in politics, in part, because their opportunities in the private sector have been so much greater. So most of my contemporaries, who have been fortunate enough to get the sort of education that I received, they go into business or corporate work. If they do go into government, they typically choose to go to Washington D.C and work in a high level administrative agency as

opposed to working at the grassroots level. So I think part of it is just we haven't yet seen a transition between that Civil Rights era and this new generation of elected officials. And part of it has to do with probably the fact that I represent the children of the Civil Rights Movement, who've had opportunities to study and advance economically as a consequence of the sacrifices that our parents made, and that provides this generation with special advantages, but also special burdens or responsibilities that maybe we haven't fulfilled yet.

EVALUATES THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN IMPROVING BLACK LIVES

As a person who social change has been such a very prominent part of your whole life--,

Right.

Do you see politics, you know, and at a time when politicians and politics are taking a beating. There's a lot of--

Not held in high regard.

Not held in high regard, right. Do you believe that politics for African Americans is still a way to effectuate change?

Oh, absolutely. I think it's not the only way to effectuate change. I think that that's part of developing an agenda for African American progress that recognizes that it's not an either/or question. It's not politics or economics. It's not Booker T. Washington or W.E.B. DuBois. It's not [Dr.] Martin [Luther King, Jr.] or Malcolm [X]. It's both/and. And I think that the progress that we need to make now involves having a strong sense of political power, but combining that with a strong focus on economic advancement. And the two can go hand in hand historically in this country, you know, obtaining the levers of political power have a great deal--has a great deal to do with your ability to advance economically. And, you know, if you look at the billions of dollars that are spent by the federal, state and local governments, both in terms of providing basic infrastructure that allows for economic advancement but, most importantly, schools that should be working, it's very hard for us to advance as a people unless our schools improve. But also, just in terms of government as a player in the marketplace. It buys services, it gives out contracts, it employs huge numbers of people that circulate money back into the economy. So I think that the notion that we can somehow ignore government makes no sense, but, certainly, to the extent that we think that we are going to succeed only by virtue of redistributing dollars through government programs, that's not a recipe for success either. Because at some point where we have to focus on how do we become productive as a community and not just consumers, you know, not just having more money or more income, but also how are we creating wealth and opportunity for ourselves and our children.

CONSIDERS HIS LEGACY

You're young so you may not have an answer to this question, but it's a question I ask everyone. And that is, what do you want your legacy to be?

Well, you know, I would like to, first of all, be able to say that I was a good husband and father along with being a good elected official, which isn't always an easy thing to do, as my wife [Michelle Obama] likes to remind me, and my daughter [Malia], who's now three, well, soon to be three is starting to be able to remind me as well. But, you know, I think that my career is still largely ahead of me as opposed to behind me, so it's hard to start writing my epitaph. But I think, you know, what I'd like to be able to say is that at the end of my career my involvement in public service advanced opportunity for the African American community in a significant way, and that I was able to help shape the political dialogue in this country in a more constructive way not just for African Americans, but for all people because I think that, ultimately, I really do believe that the fates of blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians in this country are all tied together. That's part of what makes this country special is that--and that goes back to my early characterization about African Americans, I think is also true of America. America is a hybrid culture, and we don't recognize that or embrace that in our politics as much as we should. And I think if we did, we'd have a healthier, happier community.

CREDITS INFLUENTIAL FIGURES IN HIS LIFE

Who would you say has influenced you most in your life? Who or who have you be most respected? Or--it could be mentors, it could be your, you know, it could be one person, it could be several.

Well, I think, you know, obviously, your influences start with your family and so the biggest influence on my life I'm sure has been my mother [Ann Dunham] and her presence and my father [Barack Obama, Sr.], often times, in his absence. I think that most of my influences probably are not so much people that I knew personally as people whose words I've internalized. You know, I think that the Civil Rights Movement probably had the biggest influence on my life, the participants in that. Not just Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] or **Malcolm [X]**, but Bob Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks and, you know, E.D. [Edgar Daniel] Nixon and, you know, all the characters that made up that process, I think, are the folks who ended up having the biggest impact on my life. Their stories tell me what ordinary people can do in extraordinary times, and also remind me of what this country at its best can be, and so I think they have done more to shape the trajectory of my career more than anybody else even though most of them I have never met personally.

NAMES HIS FAVORITE FOOD

What is your favorite food?

My favorite food. Goodness. What is my favorite food? It's probably red beans and rice.

LISTS HIS OTHER FAVORITES

Your favorite color?

My favorite color. I don't really have a favorite color. Maybe blue. Sure, why not? Blue.

Your favorite time of year?

That is probably late summer, early fall.

Your favorite vacation destination?

Bali.

And your favorite phrase or saying? Do you have one?

(Laughs) "I'm tired."

(Laughs) Okay.

(Laughs) "I'm sleepy."

(Laughs) Okay.

That's the one that comes to mind--.

(Laughs) Okay.

Recently, that's the one I've been saying most frequently.