DAVID REMNICK and TA-NEHISI COATES

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. My goal, as you know, quite simply, is to make the lions roar. Many of you know that I say this too often but one more time, my goal is to make the lions roar and to make this institution levitate. To help achieve this goal tonight, an exchange about Obama and race featuring Ta-Nehisi Coates and David Remnick. And coming up LIVE from the New York Public Library this spring to further advance our mission, come hear this Friday George Prochnik discuss his pursuit of silence in our loud world, what are the benefits of decluttering our sonic world?

Later this month an evening about *Candide* to celebrate our exhibition here at the New York Public Library, *Candide at 250*—it's 250 years old—*Scandal and Success*, cocurated by the President of the New York Public Library, Paul LeClerc, who is present tonight and who I would like to recognize. Paul. **(applause)**

Later in the month an evening with Peter Carey, who will be joined by Claire Messud and Edmund White, and at the end of April, I will have the pleasure of interviewing Patti Smith. We end our season with a night about soccer and the World Cup, some sports from time to time, but also a conversation with Lena Herzog and Lawrence Weschler. I will also be speaking with John Waters and Christopher Hitchens. But don't worry, it won't happen on the same night. **(laughter)** Christopher Hitchens, you may be intrigued to know, has just completed a memoir entitled *Hitch-22*. I would also like to alert you to a very interesting program the Cullman Center for Writers and Scholars is presenting tomorrow night right here in the Bartos Forum on the Shakespeare authorship controversy with Columbia University professor James Shapiro and *The New York Times* columnist Randy Cohen. Announcements for all these programs are on your chairs in this room and online. I suggest you join our mailing list.

Libraries matter so much in the life of our nation. To the point of the conversation tonight, you may already know that President Obama found his first job as a community organizer in Chicago because a librarian at the Mid-Manhattan Library of The New York Public Library helped him. Now, you will agree, I think, that the destiny of our nation might have been changed were it not for that librarian. **(laughter)** Now what I don't think

you know is that Keith Richards—yes, Keith Richards, right after Barack Obama— one of the founding members of the Rolling Stones, is writing his memoir due out in October. In it he confesses his secret longing—I hope you're ready for this—he's always wanted to be a librarian. **(laughter)** "When you are growing up," Keith Richards writes, "there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully: the church, which belongs to God, and the public library that belongs to you. The public library is a great equalizer." **(applause)** Now it may not surprise you that I plan to invite Keith Richards to be on this stage live come October to discuss the role of libraries in our democracy. I think I'll discuss something else with him, too, but at least that.

I urge you to become a supporter of The New York Public Library, be it as a Young Lion, if you happen to be young enough, or as a Conservator, or consider joining the President's Council, but nobody here should put off becoming a Friend of the New York Public Library. For just forty dollars a year, you will be a Friend of the New York Public Library. That's, if you ask me, a pretty cheap date. And with it you will get all kinds of great discounts, including the programs of the New York Public Library LIVE will be discounted for you. This evening, tonight, is cosponsored by Sutherland Asbill & Brennan, a proud supporter of the New York Public Library and a member of its Lawyers for the Library committee. Founded in 1924, Sutherland provides legal services throughout the United States and worldwide. Tonight I would like to particularly recognize Bill Bradley, who is on the Lawyers for the Library Committee and who spearheaded the sponsorship. Thank you very much, Bill Bradley. **(applause)**

During tonight's conversation, we will ask you to write out any questions you might have. I will pick a few of the best ones, the ones that are most legible as well as the ones that are succinct. So, you know what you need to do to be chosen. David Remnick will sign *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* at the conclusion of the evening. As always we thank our independent bookseller, 192 Books, for their help.

It is a pleasure to welcome back to a LIVE from the New York Public Library event Ta-Nehisi Coates, who was here nearly exactly one year ago, on April 9, 2009, in a program we cosponsored with *Bookforum* on Black Nationalism in the Obama era. Ta-Nehisi Coates is a son of a former Black Panther and wrote a memoir entitled *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*. I think it's only fitting that Ta-Nehisi's son, age nine, should be here tonight. Coates is a senior editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

It is a great pleasure also to welcome back David Remnick, who has been on this stage numerous times. David sits on the Board of Trustees of the New York Public Library and, as all of you know, I imagine, since 1998 is the editor of the *New Yorker*. He is a recipient of a Pulitzer Prize for *Lenin's Tomb*. He has written numerous books, among them *King of the World*, on the evolution of Cassius Clay into Muhammad Ali in the midst of the civil rights movement. His book, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* came out today. I am thrilled to be welcoming him to this stage for what I know and for what I hope will be a spirited exchange on Obama and race. Ta-Nehisi Coates and David Remnick.

(applause)

TA-NEHISI COATES: Wow, a lot of people. Lot of people. As a kind of a prerequisite for having the privilege of interviewing David, I've been given many lectures not to go soft on him.

DAVID REMNICK: Great.

(laughter)

TA-NEHISI COATES: I've had the luxury of working for David a couple of times, so there was a great concern that I might be intimidated. But I think it was maybe in the *Times* today somebody referred to David as a player/coach as an editor who actually stoops down to our level sometimes and is willing to write and write quite well. But the thing about being a player/coach is when you're in practice the other players get to foul you. It's a beautiful thing. **(David Remnick laughs)** You get to exact some measure of revenge for your coach's lectures upon you. And so I say that to assure you guys that I'm going to enjoy this very much tonight, it's quite an honor.

DAVID REMNICK: Will I? Okay, elbows out.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I wanted to start with a particular question for you in terms of identity, the book is very much about Barack Obama's identity. In your writing you're not a big first-person sort of I-I-I journalist, but I wonder how much your own identity influenced your attraction to the story, shaped how you approached the story, if at all.

DAVID REMNICK: You mean ethnic identity?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Yes, very much so.

DAVID REMNICK: I got mine at the kitchen table. I got mine in the community that I grew up in. I got mine in the New York area. It came easily to me to some degree. I think that there's lots of the aspect of being an American Jew that is not complete in me. Belief is one, that's not something that's a big part of my life, and my knowledge of the great tradition of learning is limited, and I hope I'll correct that as I get older. But I didn't have to figure out how I was as a Jewish American at a kitchen table with Episcopalian grandparents and a missing Jewish father in a little rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where there were no Jews except on military bases. That's an idea, isn't it?

That's Barack Obama's—the very crude frame of Barack Obama's story. Of what was missing. Look how much he had to figure out. I mean, he's born who he is, he can look in the mirror, but it must have been extraordinarily confusing to have this father who was a ghost, a myth, a collection of stories that he barely knew and, by the way, were highly unreliable. He spent *ten days* with his father during his conscious life, ten days. He grew

up in Honolulu and went to a highly privileged school—there were a couple of other black students—and in a place that prided itself on multiculturalism before it was even a word, with no black people around, except for the occasional soldier, on a basketball court, or at a party. So where does he get it from? He watches TV, he reads books. I mean, it's a really mystifying, difficult thing.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And you know, yet, even as you say that, and I've heard that before, there's a long portion in your book where you place Barack Obama's autobiographies, memoir, in the tradition of African American memoir, and for African Americans there's always this sort of sense of distinguishing or defining yourself by your own terms, as opposed to what the world defines you as. So you talk some about Malcolm X, being in prison and having to rediscover himself and redefine blackness in a way that's very different than how he defined it when he was out on the street.

DAVID REMNICK: The literature, like the people, is immensely diverse. There's not one book repeated endlessly, beginning with slave narratives, and he very self-consciously writes this memoir with an awareness of these books that helped him become himself, an awareness of their structure, and that book, *Dreams from My Father*, has a structure that's very similar to many other African American memoirs and also memoirs by other writers who are trying to find their identity, not just African Americans, but he's particularly interested in that himself, and what does that mean? Well, he's a guy who has an absent father—Malcolm X, Richard Wright—he's in search of his own name, he's in search of an ethnic identity, he's in search of a community, he's in search of a purpose in

his life. I mean, all these things he has to go out and get. He makes a journey, and you can name almost every African American memoir of great importance, and they all have—in some way or another—these elements of physical journey, psychic journey, finding a community, finding a purpose, he's writing in that tradition.

It's a highly structured book, too. That book is a young man's book by a guy who has read a lot of books. It's in three sections. Each one ends with him—and this is not a guy we know for his high emotional content or exhibitionism— ending in tears. Each section ends with him in tears, whether it's he finds Jeremiah Wright's church and a faith and a sense of place in Chicago or whether he's at his father's grave in the Kenyan village of Kogelo or at the end of the book, so it's a very structured book. It's a very good book. It's also a book that's probably at this point—"overrated" is a word we use on, you know, sports talk radio, but it's valued in a outsized way because of the political content and his importance as a historical figure.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And did you—one of the things that I try to do in understanding race—this goes for anybody in the country—is look for analogues in the American experience and obviously that presents specific difficulty—slavery obviously presents a very specific difficulty, the African American experience is a very unique thing, but we're always looking for analogies to help us understand. I wonder if you found analogues for his journey in other ethnic Americans. This is part of why I started out with a question about your own identity.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, we just had Seder, right? Which is all about slavery, exile, liberation from bondage, it's thousands of years ago, it's a lot longer ago, but that story has a biblical resonance—so much so that you see it in the black church all the time. What's the first major address that Barack Obama gives to the African American community after he's announced for the presidency? He goes and gives a speech in Selma, Alabama, this resonant place of the civil rights struggle, and he talks about the Moses generation, a well-known black guy, and the Joshua generation. The Moses generation is the generation of civil rights, the generation of King, of Joseph Lowery, who we just heard, of John Lewis, and about himself and the Joshua generation. I mean, he is giving himself an enormous task and with great gall he's placing himself at the head of a generation, and I'm going to take you where? To the Promised Land. I mean, that's an amazingly ballsy thing to say and he's saying it directly in Brown's Chapel, where Martin Luther King had spoken in the pulpit so many times.

So, resonances, yes, analogies, yes, but one thing doesn't always equal another. I wouldn't begin to compare the—in a direct way, the Jewish American experience to the African American experience. First of all, you were here a lot longer and in very, very different circumstances, and we don't have to play the comparative suffering game, but it's—one thing doesn't equal the other, exactly, but there are metaphors, there are biblical resonances even in Obama's own language.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I want to come back to the whole Joshua generation thing in a second but I want to stick with him as a young man in Hawaii, the influence of his

mother in terms of defining himself as an African American. We just had this story, not to insert my own blog into this, but kind of jumped about it on the blog on the notion that he checked black on the census was a story because he's often, you know, said as much. Did he choose, did he actually have a choice, do you have any insight into why it might be news, why it's surprising?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, I think that race is something that is often both chosen and acquired. It's something that is given to you, genetically, historically, but it's also something that you have some say in. Obama had some say in this, and he chose certain ways of educating himself, of being, of identifying, where does he plant himself when he has the first chance he gets. He gets off of Hawaii as soon as he possibly can. He goes to Los Angeles, that's too remote from the city—

TA-NEHISI COATES: And do you think race is part of that?

DAVID REMNICK: Absolutely. Because he says that "I left Occidental College," which is near Pasadena "to get to Columbia University," because it's closer to an urban center and closer to an African American population.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Near Harlem.

DAVID REMNICK: Near Harlem. And where does he go after that? The South Side of Chicago, and that's where he comes alive. That's where he finds a sense of purpose and

identification and all those things we know. That's where he really finds his sense of idealism and his ethnic—I don't think he ever had an option to be Chinese American or even white, but he chose a very definite way of being.

TA-NEHISI COATES: But he certainly could have—obviously these two people are in very different fields, but he certainly could have defined himself as multiracial, as Cablinasian, to take Tiger Woods for an—

DAVID REMNICK: And people do. And it should also be made, to state the obvious, that some very, very high percentage of African Americans somewhere along the line have Caucasian genetic material in their bloodstreams, in their genetic material, but that's hardly everything.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Right, right.

DAVID REMNICK: Hardly everything. With him, though, it was a very particular kind of problem or circumstance because of the missing father and present mother or mostly present mother and these grandparents and where he grew up. He didn't grow up with those same set of circumstances in Kenwood or Englewood or anywhere else on the South Side.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And how did you think the decision to the extent that it was a decision to the extent that he—and in his book he talks about this, and meeting people, he

jokes about it, he meets all these people who say, “I’m not black, I’m multiracial,” and he jokes that he never sees them hanging around any black people, even though they claim to be open to everything.

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, he encounters this at Occidental a lot.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Right. How does that play into his political career? I wonder had he again to the extent that there was a choice to identify as multiracial not necessarily black—

DAVID REMNICK: It’s a huge theme in his political career. Every step of the way race plays a gigantic role every time he runs for office. When he ran for state senator he committed an act of impiety against the long-standing regulars there by refusing to step back from Alice Palmer, who had had a much deeper relationship to the community than he did. When he ran for Congress in 2000 he ran against a former Black Panther, and somebody extremely popular on the South Side, an act of impiety, and he got his ass handed to him. He lost two-to-one, and it was an ugly, ugly race in which Bobby Rush and another opponent were really putting it out on the street that “this guy is inauthentic”—“not black enough” was the phrase—that “he’s an outsider, he’s not really one of us, he doesn’t have our experience,” et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, which is a complete denial of the black experience in America, which is immensely diverse, whether it’s people who are from the Caribbean or from Africa or from—this subject dogs him all

the way, it doesn't begin with the presidential race, it even happens in the Senate race in 2004.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And since you mention Bobby Rush, there's a great scene in your book, and we've talked about this, where Bobby Rush harps on how Obama walks, his "bop," as we tend to call it, and he jokes that Obama did not walk like that before he came to Chicago and that he acquired this kind of way of walking—

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: I'm going to do you a favor. I am not going to get up and imitate Bobby Rush.

(laughter)

TA-NEHISI COATES: No, we're not going to do that. But it's a great scene, because Bobby Rush stands up and does the walk—

DAVID REMNICK: Bobby Rush is not a young man anymore, his health is not the best, he's very tall and very skinny, and he is the cock of the walk. He's the cock of the walk because he's the one guy who beat Obama, and he beat him soundly, so here he is in his Congressional office, "It's very nice that Barack has won, finally," **(laughter)** and he's, you know, he's mocking him and then he gets up and he just sashays across the

office, and he says, “You know, back then he didn’t walk like that when he ran against me.” You know, he’s accusing him even to this day of inauthenticity as if we all don’t learn, as if we’re sort of born with walks and all kinds of things.

TA-NEHISI COATES: The funny thing. You know, it was very interesting to me. My spouse who lives in Chicago, I’m sorry, who’s *from* Chicago, she always talks about when she moved to the West Side, she had to learn the double Dutch at age twelve. I used to practice my bop in the mirror; I’m not ashamed to admit that, so it was acquired with me also. But in reading that, it struck me that some of this is potentially not just African Americans but Chicago, that his reception may have been different in Harlem, where you have Africans, where you have Caribbeans, as well as black Americans up from the South.

DAVID REMNICK: Absolutely. I think, without overgeneralizing about populations, that in the South side of Chicago especially back then when he’s first encountering it. It’s more purely the classic Great Migration African Americans from Mississippi and the rest of those places that begins, well, around you know World War I and lasts until really, lasts until 1970, and all that coming first to the South Side and then to the West Side, which is significantly poorer and less established and has less diverse economies, whereas Harlem, even back then, you had immigrations from really all over the place, it’s quite a different scene, and I think it’s quite possible that the greatest stroke of luck that Barack Obama ever had—and nobody gets anywhere or very far, without luck playing

some role—is to end up in Chicago at a crucial moment as a young man. It just meant everything to him.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And you think because if say he stays in New York, does he get subsumed by Charlie Rangel and that whole machine? **(laughter)** That has a new meaning now I wasn't aware until I said that.

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, right. That. **(laughter)** That thing you were saying. But in—Harlem has a political clubhouse. It's in its senescence now, it's in its decline, but there's been an establishment there that was very well ordered and tough to crack for decades. Chicago's a little bit more fluid, and also it extends to the West Side, too, it's a different scene.

TA-NEHISI COATES: There's also a great scene, I don't remember whether he's campaigning for—I'm complimenting him too much already, I'm clearly failing here. Nevertheless, there is a great scene in the book.

DAVID REMNICK: This reminds me of the Obama thing on the basketball court where's he's being nice to the guy, he's being nice to the guy, the next thing you know Obama's sinking three and killing the guy. So I know life is long.

TA-NEHISI COATES: There's a scene where—forgive my language—where one of the guys basically says to him, "Motherfucker, you gotta learn how to talk." Where he gets in his face and says that. Can you talk some about his education?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, I would never use language like that in the New York Public Library, but . . .

(laughter)

TA-NEHISI COATES: George Carlin was here so I felt free to go ahead and quote—

DAVID REMNICK: But just like you said. **(laughter)** You know, Obama was smart enough, even when he was getting his ass handed to him in the Congressional race in 2000, to hire some people that knew their way around as they call them in Chicago, taverns and, you know, clubhouses and not just—you know, he didn't just bring his Harvard friends. And they would yell at him, you know, they said, "you're going into these black churches and talking you're teaching law at the University of Chicago." But he hadn't learned it yet. This is not something you get in Hawaii. This is not something you get the first five times you do it. Barack Obama didn't give a—you know, it took practice, it's like being a musician. You don't get to be Sonny Rollins by picking up the saxophone five or six times and saying, "I'm there, let's do it." You do it over and over and over again in your woodshed.

That's what amazing about Barack Obama is how quickly he got to the level he did as a politician. Let's remember one thing. He was a state senator. This is not an exalted—everybody raise your hand if you can name your state senator. **(laughter)** That's pathetic, and that's at the Library, **(laughter)** okay. That's pathetic. And you can be sure the percentages are not much higher anywhere else. That's who he was. And suddenly he runs for Congress, and he loses, and his wife says, "Okay, honey, that's enough. You got—you're the president of the *Harvard Law Review*, and you're making . . . and we still have college loans and we may have college loans until we're on Social Security, and it's time to do good and do well."

And he goes into the Woods Foundation and he interviews to be head of the Woods Foundation, which is this big charitable foundation that gives away lots of money and you get a great big salary and maybe a membership at a country club or something and you'd be doing good and doing well and his hands are shaking during the job interview, and they come out of the interview, and the head of the Woods Foundation says, "look, you can have the job if you want it, but, Barack, you don't want this. You've got the political bug." And his friends at the University of Chicago just thought he was ridiculous. "Why is he doing this? Why is he continuing in politics?" He had the bug, he wanted to be *that*. He is a *pol*, all right? We think of him in exalted terms and we should in many ways, and we think of him in many different terms, but he is also a politician.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Can you define that in a little bit more tangible terms? What specifically about him?

DAVID REMNICK: Somebody who is not speaking in the prophetic voice—he's not Martin Luther King, he's not Gandhi. He's a guy who believes in the art of the possible. "I have to get elected to do what I want to do, and once I'm elected, I can get done what is possible." We are not living in a world of single-payer health insurance. We are living—thank God—in a world of health insurance that's a lot better than it was a few weeks ago, although we haven't felt it yet, a lot better. **(applause)** And I suspect—look, in my heart, but I don't think with my heart. In my heart, do I think Barack Obama is against gay marriage? I mean, I'm as for it as one could be for anything. And he's against it, and he talks about civil unions and all the rest, but he's a politician. He thinks that if he races too far ahead of the general populace, he will leave them behind and lose. That's the way a politician thinks, and it's not unreasonable to think so. So that is a big part of who he is. He is not speaking in the prophetic voice. He is echoing the prophetic voice when he gives a speech, he is echoing Martin Luther King, or even Malcolm X, when he was in South Carolina, which was a great moment, an interesting moment.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Right. Very much.

DAVID REMNICK: But he's got to win, he's not the president of black America, he's the president of the United States, and he won the state of North Carolina and in other states where it was miraculous for a Democrat to win, much less Barack Hussein Obama. So that is a remarkable political feat, not a prophetic achievement.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And yet there's still a lot of people out there who are speaking in the prophetic voice as they define themselves.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, he was asked once—I think it was at an interview or a debate. He was asked, and I think Hillary was in the race, "Who would Martin Luther King have voted for?" This is the kind of question that people in my loosely defined profession **(laughter)** like to just kind of roll under the door like in a Bruce Willis movie and see what happens. **(laughter)** Obama answered it brilliantly. He said, "Martin Luther King would not be *for* any of us. He would be pushing us, pushing us, and criticizing us to go farther and farther in the direction of justice."

TA-NEHISI COATES: It strikes me thought, that people who are speaking in the prophetic voice, the critics, his African American critics, with very real and respectable ideals, have a different problem than Martin Luther King had. I'm pretty sure Lyndon Johnson didn't get 94 percent of the African American vote—this is a guy who is immensely popular, so they don't have the masses on their side in saying, "wait," it strikes me as a very different challenge.

DAVID REMNICK: Lyndon Johnson had something else. Lyndon Johnson's mentor in senate is Richard Russell, who's a very effective senate leader who just also happens to be a segregationist racist. And Lyndon Johnson comes along, and for both political reasons and moral reasons decides to be for a civil rights act and for a voting rights act,

which is a complete betrayal of his mentor, so he has other political imperatives and jujitsu acts to achieve.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And I wonder—for people who—we talked about this some upstairs, too, so forgive me for bringing this back in.

DAVID REMNICK: They don't know that.

TA-NEHISI COATES: They don't know that—I'm just going to recycle here. How can critics get around that? I mean, if you can't put numbers on the street, you can't have a march on Washington. Tavis Smiley had his new version of his state of the black union a couple weeks back and Michael Eric Dyson asserted that he was not Joshua or Moses, he was Pharaoh. Is what he called Obama.

DAVID REMNICK: And why Pharaoh? He called him Pharaoh because he's keeping his own people down?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Well, no, because he's in power now. He's the power. He's the power now, he's the structure.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, he is!

TA-NEHISI COATES: So in a sense I say that that's definitely defensible. But unlike in the sixties and unlike before the sixties, he can't motivate mass groups of people, mass groups of African Americans out to protest Barack Obama. It strikes me as a very different challenge.

DAVID REMNICK: No, he can motivate his opposition. It's the Tea Party movement that's on the streets, and the Tea Party movement which even has a little Saul Alinsky in them, but they're motivated. I think a lot of them are motivated by legitimate concerns. Anytime you have 10 percent unemployment and the economic unsureness that we have, historically there's going to be real upset. You put a black president into that picture and you shouldn't be shocked, and then you add the incredible propaganda machine that is seen in parts of the Internet and on Fox and all the rest, and, you know, look out. Look out. Now, again, I want to emphasize there are people in the Tea Party movement that are legit conservatives and, you know, decent people, and I may disagree with them on just about every issue imaginable, but there are also aspects of this movement that are butt-ugly, that are dangerous, and it's egged on by people on television at times, and the obvious people, and, you know, it can lead to a horrendous outcome.

TA-NEHISI COATES: How different would it have been with Hillary Clinton?

DAVID REMNICK: It's hard to say, but I don't think it would have been any picnic for the first woman as a president, either.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I want to just go back to Chicago for a moment. Can you talk some more about why at that particular moment, he—I know you said he had it within him, but he also had other concerns, his wife really wanted him to quit. If you can talk about their relationship, how he brought her along?

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, I think, you know, she's a traditional woman, a traditional woman. She grew up in this family, her father is working for the city, and her mother works for I think it was the Spiegel catalog for a while as a receptionist, and then is at home, and what happens is that—and they live in this very modest house on the South Side—and the older son goes to Princeton, and that's a big deal. That's a big deal for any family, I can tell you that, and it's a big, big deal for the Robinsons. And then *she* gets in. And to some extent, Princeton's a mixed bag; they used to say about Princeton when I was there a long time ago that it was the northernmost point of the Confederacy. **(laughter)** It wasn't New Jersey as I knew it growing up, but, you know, it is a pretty gilded place, and not the South Side of Chicago, and then she goes to Harvard Law School and she's more at ease, and she does—in fact, she's way more idealistic than Obama in law school. She's working for the poor, you know, she's defending indigent clients. Obama, not so much. He's doing the straighter arrow thing, he's at the *Harvard Law Review*, his mentors are not Charles Ogletree so much, as they are Larry Tribe and Martha Minnow, who are, you know, white, liberal constitutional scholars, especially in Tribe's case. Slightly different path, Harvard is not their intersection, because they're there at different times.

She wants him—she said, “you know, you’re such a star, great, do good, do some pro bono cases.” When I was growing up, and I announced to my grandmother, who did some caring of me, that I wanted to be a writer, at age seven, I’d never met a writer, I didn’t know what a writer was. And we would meet people on the subway, and naturally the old lady would ask my grandmother—you know, after pinching my cheek and spreading powder all over me and all that kind of thing—“what do you want to do when you grow up?” and I would say, “I want to be a writer,” and my grandmother would magically interrupt and say, “A *doctor* writer!” **(laughter)** and I think to some extent Michelle Obama wanted Barack to be a “doctor writer,” that wanted him to, you know, “let’s get busy here, I want to have a family, I want to get rid of these loans, we can live a good life and also live pretty well.”

He just couldn’t bear the idea of being a corporate lawyer or anything of the kind or an investment banker. He ran away from that stuff. Remember, to graduate from Columbia in the early ’80s—I graduated in ’81, he’s ’82/’83—it’s the first crest of the Reagan years, it’s the first crest of 70 percent of Ivy League kids in a given class interviewing at investment banks, I mean in huge numbers, not exactly an idealistic time in these elite institutions. What does Barack Obama do? He goes and he works as a community organizer on the South Side. He’s got this in him.

TA-NEHISI COATES: How different do you think—if you compare his reception by the mainstream of the country while he was running for president with hers given—

DAVID REMNICK: "Hers" being Hillary?

TA-NEHISI COATES: I am sorry, excuse me, "Hers" being Michelle, and I mean given if I can say this right, the different tribes of African American identity that they come from? Do you think the fact that she was a lot more—

DAVID REMNICK: It's hard to say what his tribe is, do you know?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Right, yes it is.

DAVID REMNICK: He's a little bit, he's not sui generis, but he's close to it. She is right, you know—

TA-NEHISI COATES: She's right within that tradition we know about in the mainstream. And I wonder if that affected how they were perceived at all during throughout the campaign?

DAVID REMNICK: I think it did, I think there's no question about it, and it's hard to remember now, but there was a time when there was lots of talk that "there's a film of Michelle and she's talking about Whitey all the time."

TA-NEHISI COATES: The "Whitey" tape.

DAVID REMNICK: The "Whitey" tape. Damn. There was also an incredible Talmudic reading of her senior thesis in college, if you can imagine if that ever happened to you? **(laughter)** Do you want your thesis gone over? That's bad news. And she's written about race and what black Princeton graduates do and do they sell out? And people got all nervous about this, because, you know, we grind it up, this is what we do in journalism, and a lot of it's for the good, and some of it's ridiculous. But her image was for some people different. I think she played a magnificent, essential role, and, by the way, to go back historically in terms of their marriage, it doesn't require me, white guy to say this, but any number of people I spoke to—black academics and just people I talked to, various African Americans, said, "Look, you know, Barack Obama's not getting 94 percent of the vote if he had married a white woman." If he had married a white woman.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And you came away convinced of that?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, you know, sometimes in journalism you quote someone and you let it sit. **(laughter)** It's not a demonstrable fact. It certainly is a point of view and it seems to me a legitimate point of view. Who's to know? Who's to know? We're not playing alternate histories here, but this is a view taken by smart people. What do you think?

TA-NEHISI COATES: I want to think that he could have won no matter who he married. I highly doubt that he could have won without her.

DAVID REMNICK: Look at the role Michelle played in the crucial primary. Again, Iowa is won without much reference to race, right? Iowa is won—Obama's differentiation from Hillary is on Iraq. South Carolina's a different scene.

TA-NEHISI COATES: She had literal roots there, am I correct?

DAVID REMNICK: She has slave roots there. She goes to South Carolina and she comes down and gives the most amazing speech in South Carolina. She basically gets in front of a big black audience where there had been, I forget what it was, what demonstration or what scene had happened there, it's slipping my mind. She gets up and basically addresses a nearly all-black audience, mainly women, and says, "I know what you're talking about. I hear it. You're afraid for him. You've lived in this country. You know what can happen. I'm here to tell you I am putting my *husband* out there, and so therefore should you. You have to try to imagine what it would mean for him to be president. Now, take him on his qualities, judge him on his intelligence and his policies and all the rest. I mean, don't—Obviously don't elect him because he's 'one of us,' but if I'm willing to take the risk, you should be." And that was a powerful message that Obama could not deliver on his own behalf. His wife did it. That was huge.

TA-NEHISI COATES: This is another quote that you have in the book, and this is the first time I had heard that angle. Obviously, there's always this great fear that something violent will happen, and that was definitely a fear during the campaign.

DAVID REMNICK: It's a fear now.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Valerie Jarrett, though, took a very different approach. And I think it's her who says this, "Those people, they weren't actually scared for him, they were scared for themselves, they were scared that they were going to be embarrassed because he might lose."

DAVID REMNICK: That's true. The incident is there was a very wealthy African American fund-raiser who called Obama at the time when Obama is trying to decide whether or not to run, and he was worried, and he expressed this worry about Obama's safety to him, and he said, "You don't have to—I know you've been taking a survey, and I know what the survey is. The white liberals want me to run, and the brothers,"—as he said, "the brothers are afraid." And Valerie Jarrett, in talking to me, said, "I don't think they were so much afraid for his life, I think they were afraid that our guy was going to lose or get humiliated." Look, I remember my grandfather—my grandfather hated to vote for somebody like Arthur Goldberg, because, you know, you don't want to be a shandah before the goyim, do you know what this means?

TA-NEHISI COATES: I have no idea what that means. **(laughter)** I'm just going to be honest, not at all.

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: I think I know who's laughing now. **(laughter)** That you don't want to fail in front of—when you're the other, though, I don't know in New York if either one of us is the other, **(laughter)** you don't want to fail when your guy, and, God willing woman, is in the position of power. It's a deeply—

TA-NEHISI COATES: Well, because then you have no excuses, right, there's no one to blame.

DAVID REMNICK: "Hey, we elected one of them," right? So there was a little bit of that, and Obama basically figured, "if they're not ready now, they're not going to be ready in my lifetime, four years is not going to make a big difference," and he had been advised by fellow senators, "you know, sticking around the senate, you may get more experience, but you're also going to get more experience, and you're going to accumulate more votes." Look at John Kerry, no one every accuses John Kerry of a lack of experience but we all think of him as this stentorian, slightly institution-bound senator. And that was a negative for him for a lot of people, not a positive. Barack Obama was a senator, overnight, he won his election, the next morning in the press conference, they were asking about running for president. It's an amazing thing.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And how much of this—people always, and there's some people who don't like him who say this in the book. Who's the gentleman that claims that they got in a fistfight, or they almost got into a fistfight?

DAVID REMNICK: Rickey Hendon, Rickey Hendon, who's a state senator from the South Side and they got into a beef on the floor of the state senate in Springfield and it came to the kind of fisticuffs or nonfisticuffs that you have on the schoolyard when it's kind of a push and, you know, "your momma," and then it got broken up. And very distinguished statesmanship.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And it's either him or someone else that makes the point that you can't understand Barack, and I thought this was very astute, unless you understand that he's calculating, that he's looking ahead. How much of this was planned?

DAVID REMNICK: Which?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Him—the whole presidency. When did he start thinking about it?

DAVID REMNICK: I think everybody who gets elected to the U.S. senate or the congress or God knows maybe even statehouses. Somewhere the tripwire happens, they look at the president, they look at somebody, and they go **(laughter)**—I mean, come on, anybody who puts on a baseball glove thinks, "Willie Mays," so it's possible. The official story is that Obama gets there and he had no thoughts whatsoever of running for president and they instituted, headed by Pete Rouse, who's now in the White House as a deputy chief of staff, but who was his chief of staff in the senate, they started in conjunction with Axelrod and the others something called "The Strategic Plan," a total

imitation of Hillary's approach to the senate. You get to the senate, you're a star, but you play down your stardom, you become a good colleague, you go pay obeisance to Robert Byrd and all the elders of the senate, and you're a good citizen of the senate, and you get on committees and you show up and you do your work. That lasted a year.

And then push came to shove, and the truth is Obama not only was bored as a state senator, he was bored as a U.S. senator. I mean, it speaks to something of his sense of enlarged self, too. He was bored as a U.S. senator almost instantly, and somebody on his staff who knows him very well said to me, "Barack would really come alive at night when he was writing his book, and that book was a campaign tool." Talking about the second book, *The Audacity of Hope*. So I think you know if you get elected the president of the *Harvard Law Review*, and you're the first African American, and the next morning there's a piece in *The New York Times* and the AP and all over the place—

TA-NEHISI COATES: You want to know how far it goes.

DAVID REMNICK: Your sense of your own horizon has just expanded immensely.

TA-NEHISI COATES: One of the more interesting elements for me. A lot of this was made in the campaign in terms of Barack Obama's relationship with radicals and putting the campaign stuff aside, he actually had had some contact repeatedly over his life with some degree of radicals, some people who were ne'er do wells, et cetera.

DAVID REMNICK: He grew up—he's a product of the universities. I don't know what your experience—I've read about, you were bumping into radicals at the kitchen table. Not mine, by the way. A radical political position in my family was if you sat too close to the television. **(laughter)** This was considered an act of immense impiety. "How can you sit there? It's too close!" **(laughter)** I kid because I love. But he went to college at the same time as I did. What was the big political thing then? South Africa. Divestment. It got warm in the springtime, we marched around, we held signs up, we made some speeches.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Did you do this? You literally did?

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah! Yeah! And, by the way, I brought down apartheid. I don't know if you know this.

(laughter)

TA-NEHISI COATES: It's your next book.

DAVID REMNICK: And he did this at Occidental a few times and he was involved in political groups, but he was a little bit more involved in reading books and playing hoop and smoking a little weed and doing college-guy things and getting Bs and not being a particularly spectacular student.

TA-NEHISI COATES: And one of the interesting things is there are a few of these quote-unquote—I hate that term—"radicals" who you call and they aren't particularly interested in talking about him, and throughout the campaign they weren't particularly interested in talking because they thought anything they might do would hurt him.

DAVID REMNICK: He grows up, essentially, on the South Side of Chicago. What's on the south side of Chicago? It's not like there's some big conservative movement on the South Side of Chicago. **(laughter)** He's growing up in the environment of the University of Chicago. Okay, there are conservatives there. But the Nation of Islam is around.

TA-NEHISI COATES: There are conservatives there, too.

DAVID REMNICK: Good point. Jesse Jackson's people, ditto. But it is a left-leaning political community by any American standard. You know, I remember when I was doing some reporting, some people were whispering in my ear, "you know, one of the secretaries in his office, she was a member of the Nation of Islam." Oh, my God! And it's just—did he know William Ayres? Yeah, he knew William Ayres. Did he know Richard Posner? Actually, he didn't know Posner, but he knew conservative academics at the University of Chicago, too. That didn't make him a libertarian. It doesn't rub off.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I bring this up, because one of the interesting things, is, I had, you know, my dad, who has some experience with radicalism, he called me at some point

in the campaign. He was always lecturing me about how I was drinking the soda or the juice or whatever.

DAVID REMNICK: The Kool-Aid.

TA-NEHISI COATES: The Kool-Aid, thank you, the Kool-Aid, whatever it is, the Kool-Aid, thank you, and he says to me, he relates a conversation that he had had with some of his old radical friends from the sixties, and you know, he's, my dad is still rabble-rousing, and they said, "Paul, he's the best chance we've got. I don't want to hear it."

DAVID REMNICK: Did he go with him at the end?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Kinda, as much as he could possibly go with him, yeah, he did.

DAVID REMNICK: This was the typical generational pushback that Obama got from the start.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I was shocked how much he actually went with him.

DAVID REMNICK: It's like Adolph Reed. Adolph Reed's politics are different than your dad's, but he is a kind of union left-wing pushback, and Adolph Reed in the midst of the state senate campaign—he is now at the University of Pennsylvania, he was then at

Chicago— wrote a piece basically calling Obama the product of the foundation world and an outsider, and, you know, it was a pretty brutal attack, it was published in the *Village Voice*. And he got a lot of this from the old nationalist community, of which there are a significant number in the South Side. And that was a stream of opinion that helped elect Harold Washington, not that Harold Washington was a nationalist. By the way, we speak of nationalism as if it's something terrible. Black Nationalism is part of the diversity of something we now call in sainted terms "the civil rights movement." The civil rights movement itself was diverse, and we forget that now, because it's all focused on King.

TA-NEHISI COATES: One of the things that I took away from the book, and actually, as great of a story as it is, what actually made me sad was the feeling that *I* could not be president, and obviously I can't be president, but I don't mean that in the individual way, but that—

DAVID REMNICK: You can't be president because you have a piece due.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Right, that's right. That would prevent me.

DAVID REMNICK: I'm just saying.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Thanks for reminding me, I had forgotten about that, now I know. This is the intimidation thing right here, right?

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: Nota bene.

TA-NEHISI COATES: But that *any* black person can't be president. It's a particular, a particular story, a *particular* black person who's black in a specific way, he can be president—

DAVID REMNICK: We'll see next time. In other words, I hope you're wrong. I hope that his election widens the gate, maybe not even just for black people. I think that election widened the gate immensely, and I think Hillary Clinton was right in that she put a lot of—what's the phrase—of cracks in the glass ceiling. I mean, it's got to be more of a normalized thing—it's pathetic that this nation has never elected a woman, it's just *sad*, and so I think the next time around, but it's going to take, you know, an individual, and that individual will have particular qualities and we'll see how it works.

You know, I remember, being on some panel and my fellow panelist was Kwame Anthony Appiah, and we were talking about this a lot, and at the end of it, his colleague Cornel West said, "yes, they elected Barack Obama, but they could never elect"—what he meant was a much more mainstream black man meaning somebody that would be the male equivalent or female equivalent of Michelle. I don't know that. I don't know how he knows it for a certainty. He may be right in 2008.

There's no doubt that Barack Obama's political education to himself was losing in a traditional African American race on the South Side and deciding to be a different kind of politician in a different landscape, meaning the state of Illinois, which also has Southern Illinois, which has a kind of cultural electorate that's closer to the South than it is to even the suburbs of Chicago. He is, look—he is anything but foolish about this.

TA-NEHISI COATES: The other I think explicit reply to that is, I think, five years ago, I couldn't speak for Cornel West, but I think that people in my position felt that even a Barack Obama couldn't be elected.

DAVID REMNICK: I thought it was impossible. I don't know how much money I lost to Dorothy Wickenden, the executive editor at the *New Yorker*. But I remember—We wrote two big profiles of him early on, first by Bill Finnegan during the senate race, terrific piece, and then Larissa wrote which to me I think is the most right-on profile of him as a character. Ryan Lizza wrote a wonderful one of him as a pol. Larissa got him right in a way that really influenced the way I looked at him in this book, and so the notion of him running came up in the office, and Dorothy Wickenden, who's a pretty wise woman, said, you know, "I think he could win. Hillary's got a lot of baggage, it's complicated, it's wide open, there's no incumbent." And I just snottily said, you know, "Barack Hussein Obama," as if that ended the argument and therefore the wager was made and I lost.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I'm pretty sure I'm running up against time here.

DAVID REMNICK: We do questions from—

TA-NEHISI COATES: Yes, because I'll run right over Q and A. But I do—before I relinquish I do want to say one thing about this book and I was thinking so much about this. We started off with basketball, we've been talk about basketball—making basketball metaphors all the way through. I just want to say this was a beautiful, beautiful read. I can drop the mask now.

DAVID REMNICK: Thank you, and can I return the compliment? I will tell you that along with the piece I just mentioned one of the pieces that influenced me most on how to think about him was called "A Deeper Black," by Mr. Coates. It was in the *Nation*, I'm afraid.

(laughter)

TA-NEHISI COATES: That's not very nice.

DAVID REMNICK: Had it been in the *New Yorker*, I'd be a happier man, it's fine it's in the *Nation*, but I really appreciate our conversations about it through time. But we're not finished though, right?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, not at all. I'm hoping for some controversy now. **(laughter)** So I'll bring it on. Ta-Nehisi, you expressed to me in private—and why don't you do it now in public?—that you—not necessarily that you were disappointed with Barack Obama, but that you didn't necessarily think that the situation of African Americans would so much change with his presidency. Could you comment on that?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Yeah, sure. I don't think it's clear that it will. I mean, I hope that it will—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You don't have to talk to me. Talk to the audience.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Forgive me. I'm not clear that it necessarily will—the question was how much will the situation of African Americans change? And I expressed backstage that I'm not sure that it actually *will* change, and if I can expound on that, even if it does, I'm not sure how much of that will be attributable to electing a black president. That the change might have just—look, I'm a pretty Left dude, so, I mean, that it might have been just from electing a Democrat. I think and this is I think one of the sort of conflicts in the book—can you claim to be, you know, a head of a Joshua generation if the generation doesn't actually advance with you, if it's only a symbol? If—you know, Martin Luther King, there was real actual change, segregation's gone. If there's no real change in terms of statistics when we talk about African Americans, I'm suspect of how—

DAVID REMNICK: Here's where I disagree. You're going to know better than I do. Let's just stick with the very election of him. Doesn't that widen horizons for kids your son's age?

TA-NEHISI COATES: I think it changes how they look. I think they will look at race different than I did, just like I look at it differently than my dad did. But we are up against gigantic, awe-inspiring forces of history as far as I'm concerned. Maybe I'm overrating it.

DAVID REMNICK: How can you overrate it? I don't think it's possible to overrate it.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I'll tell you exactly how. I didn't think he could win in a place like Iowa or Idaho, I mean, that was the most shocking thing for me. So I can overestimate precisely what we're up against, but to me the notion and that it's almost unfair to put this on one person, to say, "Hey, you know, by virtue of your eight years, you'll reverse the tide of everything." I wonder about that.

DAVID REMNICK: I've gotta think that of thirty-odd million people who just got health care, greater access to health care, that no small number of them are people of color, and, by the way, black interests are also American interests, and if the world suddenly becomes a more dangerous place, whether it's because Iran gets nuclear weapons or because Afghanistan goes awry, and we've had just nothing but wonderful news from there in the last couple of weeks, that affects all of us, and I think that's Obama's view of the presidency, that it's a rising tide lifts all boats, and since poverty

hits people of color in greater proportion than the rest of us, then economic improvement can only help black people.

What he's not going to do, and what's going to frustrate Tavis, or Cornel, or maybe you, or maybe many other people, is an overconcentration on race as such. I remember one moment Paul distinctly in this kind of nervous-making interview that I had with Obama in the Oval Office. We had our talk, there was—we talked about race a fair amount. And then he either accidentally or accidentally on purpose came out into the hallway where I was talking to somebody else and David Axelrod, and I asked him about the Henry Louis Gates, Jr., situation, and that took them off their agenda for two weeks, at least. And what he said was, you know, "I can make a speech about that, as I did in Philadelphia, when I'm in control of the discussion, and I can balance it and fill it with nuance and I can give it my full force of thinking, but when I improvise, everybody comes to it with different baggage, everybody gets hysterical, on the right, on the left, and no light is shed," and, you know, we had this beer summit, which I don't necessarily think raised the level of anybody's discussion, **(laughter)** and, you know, even though Obama committed the classic Washington gaffe in that press conference. "The classic Washington gaffe," made famous by Michael Kinsley is "the inadvertent speaking of the truth." **(laughter)** And the truth is "I would not have gotten arrested in my home and cuffed, it just wouldn't have happened," and that's what he was—what Obama was expressing, and it was a truth, and it screwed up their agenda for two weeks.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You were saying that your conversation with him in the Oval Office inspired you with nervousness. Can you say a little bit more about what it was like to interview him for this book, and if he was particularly suspicious?

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: You know, it's a very underdecorated room. There's a bust of King, there's a bust of Lincoln, there's a couple of paintings, there's about twenty-four books, and an absolutely clean desk. And that's it. You know, we know the scene. And you sit there, and Obama is an extremely deliberate speaker, even more so than when he's talking for the camera. He just slows it down. You know, you can almost hear everyone's heart beat in the room. And you hear this grandfather clock going *gnng-gnng-gnng*. **(laughter)** It's like Edgar Allan Poe some how in there right, the telltale grandfather clock. I didn't jump out of my suit, but it was interesting to see his style very close. I'd interviewed him before, but in front of an audience, this was a much smaller, and it's in the Oval Office, it's just very different. And he's very careful now. He's in office, I mean—they don't want anything to go wrong, and so his delivery is very measured. He's a pretty careful guy to begin with.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: About three questions on that famous *New Yorker* cover.

DAVID REMNICK: Great. The one with the bowl of fruit?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Exactly.

DAVID REMNICK: That was the *best*! **(laughter)** There was one of an abandoned summerhouse with just a clothesline going across it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's the other one. That's the other one. The third one.

DAVID REMNICK: So last July. If you were out of town, you may have forgotten. It was clear who was the Democrat nominee, it was clear who the Republican nominee was. And it didn't escape notice that there polls showing that some huge—I forget what the numbers were—some huge proportion of the population, a scary proportion thought that Barack Obama was any number of things thought to be negative. A Muslim—a radical—as if Muslim is bad—a Muslim, a radical, that Michelle was the second coming of Angela Davis, who the last time I looked has tenure, right? That he was soft on terrorism, blah blah blah, you know all the elements, and Barry Blitt, who I think is a kind of genius, put all these elements together to make them look ridiculous, to put the lie to them, and the title of the cover was called *The Politics of Fear*. I think it's fair to say that not everybody liked it.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Were you surprised?

DAVID REMNICK: I was surprised by the scale of the not everybody liking it. But I will tell you—and I totally respect whatever point of view you have by now, a lot of time has elapsed, every point of view on this—I got plenty of criticism, but most of the criticism that came in by e-mail, phone calls, smoke signal, and all means, was the following, the printable kind: "Of course I get it. I get what you're trying to say. It's those people out *there* who aren't going to get it, and it's going to become a kind of cudgel or worse in their hands. It's going to encourage more people to think terrible things or untrue things about Barack Obama."

Well, this I found difficult to answer, because I just don't think that that's how satire works. You may, again, you may hate this, I respect it, whatever it is. I gotta tell you that Barack Obama doesn't hate the magazine. Barack Obama passed around Atul Gawande's piece on health care. Barack Obama has, through an aide, has called for other covers to be signed and sent in to him. I think, you know, it was forgotten a lot faster by Barack Obama than some other people. But, you know, it happens.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Paul, can I push back just a little bit?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I should hope so.

TA-NEHISI COATES: Because I have to fess up long before I actually knew David Remnick I blow **q**uite a bit at the magazine, and I was one of the loud voices objecting to the cover and I think, I think even now I will stick by this. In the context of everything that was being said right then, in the context of the campaign, it did not look ridiculous. It looked like an almost literal reflection of what some significant group of Americans actually thought would happen.

DAVID REMNICK: But would a cover on the *New Yorker* have made it worse? Is that what your fear was?

TA-NEHISI COATES: I didn't think it would have much impact. In all honesty, as satire, I just thought it didn't work. It would be like Jon Stewart just ran a loop of Fox News that night.

DAVID REMNICK: I will tell you the next night Jon Stewart thought it was the funniest thing since sliced bread.

TA-NEHISI COATES: I remember, I remember.

DAVID REMNICK: You know, the cover editor and I, Françoise Mouly and Barry talked about this a lot. It was not fun. It was not fun to go up on CNN and have Wolf Blitzer.

TA-NEHISI COATES: You were on TV, right?

DAVID REMNICK: I was on TV more than is absolutely necessary. **(laughter)** And I was on TV with Wolf Blitzer, and you're sitting in the box, you're remote, you've got the thing in your ear, which you're already at a deep disadvantage, and Wolf Blitzer said, "THIS COULD HAVE BEEN ON THE COVER OF A NAZI MAGAZINE." **(laughter)** And it was at this moment that I dearly hoped that my mother was not watching CNN. **(laughter)** And, you know, context obviously meant nothing to Mr. Blitzer at that very moment.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ta-Nehisi, in terms of disappointments with Obama so far, can you speak about some?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Yeah. **(laughter)** I think part of the problem is I don't have—I never had much expectations for politicians, so I'm at a disadvantage in terms of disappointments. I think probably the biggest thing is—and this is just sort of like, and I knew I was getting this when I voted for him, but it's this sense of—that the center is always right. You know, the sense of always looking for, you know, a way to triangulate. That annoyed me very much about the Clinton—I think he's a little better about this, but this oil-drilling thing, for instance, just feels like, "oh let me throw away something to show that I'm bipartisan." And we talked about this some behind stage. I don't know that he actually gets something out of that every time. I would be much more encouraged if I thought that by handing health care over to Max Baucus and letting them sort of discuss

and sort of feign bipartisanship for three months, if that had resulted in something I think I would have been much more impressed. It almost killed it, so I think this sort of choreography of bipartisanship isn't always particularly effective. I'd be much more in favor of it if I thought it worked.

DAVID REMNICK: I like to see the end game of each of these issues. In other words, the end game of the issue on health care was a victory, a victory that had taken a half century, so I think credit has to be given there, and six, seven weeks ago we all thought it was going to blow up. On the environment, if it stays at "drill, baby, drill," then I'm deeply disappointed and worse. If in fact that drilling is an overture to a much more aggressive environmental policy that I like as a citizen—I'm allowed to have views, after all—then I'm happy.

TA-NEHISI COATES: But do you think that bipartisanship actually helped, though, us get to that health care victory?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, he did win.

TA-NEHISI COATES: You can fumble the ball and still win, though, right?

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, you can't get through a game without fumbling the ball. You can barely get through a game without making mistakes. Look, their policy, their way of going at it was a complete reaction to the other guy's way of going at it. The

Clintons went at it by doing it all in the White House and getting everybody in there and shutting out Congress, and, you know, this is obviously a cartoon, but trying to shove it down the throat that way. They lost and it diminished not just that issue, but it diminished the entire presidency for years to come. Obama does this other thing. He and he's got Rahm Emanuel in there, and, by the way, his aides around him don't want this to happen at all. They want him to focus completely on the economy as such. He does it on his volition, and he does it the opposite way. He gives Max Baucus and all these congressional guys ownership of it. Does it work? No, not in the short term at all. Does he win? Yeah. And I'm not so sure that the Republican self-confidence that somehow by winning this victory they will lose devastating losses in November will come true. We'll see. We'll see.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There's a disappointment in his dealings or lack of dealings in issues pertaining to torture?

DAVID REMNICK: Absolutely. I agree with Jane Mayer and Sy Hersh and other people who have written this. I'm very concerned, for example, about the rollback on that, the getting rid of Greg Craig, the business of continuing any number of aspects of the—the harsher aspects of the Bush administration's so-called war on terror: wiretapping, unauthorized wiretapping and the rest. I think the things that Dick Cheney has said about this are astonishing, astonishing. And really bewildering to hear from a high-ranking American official. And maybe I'm being completely naïve about Dick Cheney, but at this point I shouldn't be.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In closing, could you talk a little bit about what it was like to write this book, because, as I recall, when we spoke about it months ago, you were to finish it in a few months from now, and you finished this book very quickly, and I'm wondering how it was for you to write this book and if it was a passionate journey.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, I have a day job that's not just a day job. It's a job that extends into all—it's not just doing it, it's also thinking about it all the time. And so to have it share time and mental energy with a project like this . . . I knew I couldn't let the book keep going and going. I mean, maybe if I had worked two years on it or three years on it it would be shorter, as they say about fiction. But I gave myself a very definite period of time—one month, two months' difference is immaterial. And I couldn't do that every year and I would never do it. I waited twelve years to write a book after becoming editor of the *New Yorker*. The last book I wrote was about Muhammad Ali, and it was finished before I started this job.

We're right now in a very important moment in publishing in general and newspapers and magazines and all the rest, and I have to concentrate really with all my being on essential questions, not only the issue that week and next month and down the line, but our very being and our survival and thriving and our economic well-being and how we're going to be read on—if you want to read us on iPad or wherever you want to read us. Those are important things, and my guiding principle for this is, first of all, we are going to thrive, because I think there is a very big audience in the United States who wants to

read what it is we do. That people don't want less depth, they want more depth, our readers. **(applause)** They want—They want—They don't want journalism that cowers in a corner, they want stuff that has boldness, and I don't think there are more and more places like this, there are fewer, potentially, because of the challenges we are going through.

I mean, for all the things you can argue with about the *New Yorker* or the *Times* or a few other places, the only way for them to thrive, the only way for them to *be*, and the only way I'm interested in having anything to do with it, is to do what we've done and more so, not less so, and if that involves designing a beautiful way to read it on the iPad, so be it, that's wonderful. If that's the delivery system that works for either everybody or half of everybody or a quarter of everybody, whatever, that's great, fine, or the Internet, or all the rest of it. I need to concentrate on that. So I gave myself a year. It took a year. I'm sleeping a little bit more on Saturdays and Sundays, and I'm—you know, this is not a stunt that I'm going to try very often.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In closing, what was the biggest surprise writing this book?

DAVID REMNICK: That I got it done.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very much.

(applause)