

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now in its ninth year this free event held Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall in Washington D.C. will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person you can still participate online. Prerecorded podcast interviews and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my pleasure to talk with the award winning journalist and now author Gwen Ifill. Ms. Ifill is currently the moderator and managing editor of Public Broadcasting's Washington Week and senior correspondent for the News Hour with Jim Lehrer. The recipient of numerous honorary doctorates, she's been recognized for her work by the Radio and Television News Directors Association, Harvard University's Joan Shorenstein Center and Ebony Magazine among others. She additionally moderated the vice presidential debates during the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. Among Ms. Ifill's many accomplishments she can now add the title author. Her best selling book *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* was released just this past January. Ms. Ifill welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

>> Thank you for having me.

>> Just a few months after the release of your book talk a little bit about the book for those who haven't heard about it which is probably about three or four people and [inaudible].

>> Well, I hope it's only three or four people. Actually it was an interesting project. I started out on this idea that I had been in my entire career covering a lot of politicians who were getting into the business as it were for the first time. Often by happenstance they were African-American politicians who were coming to power at a time when cities and states and countries were changing. And so this year when I began covering the presidential campaign, which I guess is my fourth or fifth presidential campaign, the potential, even though I have to admit I did not think Barack Obama would actually pull it off, the potential for a breakthrough African-American candidate set off all kinds of alarms in my head. I thought about the African-American candidates I had seen break through in mayor's offices and in governor's offices and in city councils and thought maybe there was a continuum here, not just one story about one breakthrough but an entire story of how the post civil rights generation, which we can argue about that term, but the people who were the beneficiaries of the folks who marched were now taking advantage by walking through the doors. And we have an entire generation of folks in their 50s, 40s, 30s, and I imagine soon in their 20s who are now taking office and following through on the promises they made to their parents.

>> You mentioned the phrase post civil rights, and in your book you say that America has not reached a post racial age. What is your definition of post racial? What will America look like when we get there?

>> I don't know if we'll ever get there, and I'm not even sure it's a goal that we should be aspiring to. America is this polyglot, it's this collection of people from different backgrounds and different histories and we are proud of that. We celebrate it. We celebrate our cultural distinctions. What we should be able to do when we talk about race or we talk about ethnicity is say it's a good thing, not necessarily a bad thing. When people say post racial they somehow imagine that we can erase our history or erase the things that made us the country we are, the stumbles and the victories. Instead I think that we can be conscious and conscious of our racial identities or ethnic identities and not necessarily have it be a negative thing. Post civil rights is different because the civil rights movement in a lot of peoples' minds was a very confined movement which involved passing laws and getting equal opportunity on many levels. And in many ways the part of that movement which is about getting laws passed and on the books has been achieved. The question is what happens now. And what happens now does not require that we forget that race exists.

>> In *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* you talk a little bit as well about whether there's still a need for gerrymandering. Talk about that if you would.

>> Well, one of the things about the laws created in order to get fair representation in a lot of places where there had not been minority representation is to draw lines for elections in congressional districts and state legislative districts which gave a little bit of an extra weight to this which were heavily under represented in the state house or the Congress but were made up of a lot of folks of color. So in trying to do that, trying to balance that out we got a lot of funny looking districts which were drawn artfully to increase the chances of African-Americans being elected. And everybody was fine with that because it meant that white elected officials didn't mind because that meant that they got to strengthen their base as well and speak to their base. The problem with that, of course, as time goes on is that we have a lot of these breakthrough candidates I talk in the book are people who actually got elected from districts which were not just drawn for Black voters. They didn't need a majority -- they got a majority of the Black vote, but what they needed to win as in the case of Barack Obama was a majority of the white vote because they still were the overwhelming number. So now that we're at this point where we have actually a lot more elected officials of color who are winning over white voters the idea for carving out special districts just to cater to so-called Black interests or minority interests declines.

>> I mentioned earlier that obviously you've been very successful in journalism award winning. What prompted you to enter the world of book writing?

>> You know for years people have been asking me whether I would write a book. And I got one very good piece of advice along the way which is only write something that you feel you can live with in your head for a couple of years, something you feel some sort of passion about. A lot of the ideas that people presented to me for books were books I wasn't particularly interested in living inside for that long. But in the middle

of an historic election which I was really very engaged and obviously covering it, but also at a time when I realized there was this connection not only to this historic election but to everything else I had kind of accidentally covered over the years it seemed like a natural story to tell. And it was one no one else had told. I mean we have only one -- well, at the time I started the book there was only one Black governor in the country, and now there's two in New York and Massachusetts, but that's not a lot. But these guys broke through in very similar ways. As I began to talk to all these different folks I realized they had the same questions. One of them was people kept saying you can't do it and they would do it anyway. Or people would say are you really Black because you're not talking Black or acting Black. You've got that Ivy League degree. And they all had to overcome that. And the more I saw that they had in common the more I thought, well, there is a theme here which is worth exploring.

>> One of the things that your book has been praised for is the breadth and depth of the interviews. Talk a little bit if you would about the process of writing this.

>> Well, because I'm a reporter by trade and because I spent the vast majority of my career in print, in newspapers, working for four different newspapers before I came into television, in my soul I'm a reporter and a writer. So to me the only way this book would work, especially since I was still working full time while trying to write it at night and on the weekends was just to do what I do best which is to call people up and go visit them and interview them. And I found that so many of these folks had never been asked this particular set of questions before, but they had been thinking about it. Time after time people would say to me, well, thank goodness you're asking this question. I've been thinking about that. And as a result we very quickly got to a very fruitful place in all these interviews because this is something which had been -- you know you're onto a good subject when it turns out other people have been trying to get their heads around it but haven't really gotten to the point of writing it or synthesizing it yet. So every person I talked to gave me an idea for a different story. I mean I had kind of chapters outlined in my head going in but then I would change them as events changed. I decided I wanted to do, for instance, a chapter about Black women in politics of which there seemed to be so many fewer. But as I continued writing and I found out two things which is Black women were not at the same level as a lot of the breakthrough Black men, and so there wasn't as much to say. But also it was in the middle of the campaign where Hillary Clinton was breaking through in gender issues. And it seemed to cry out for broadening the discussion of gender from just Black women to the whole historic tensions between African-Americans and women in terms of who gets to walk through the door first. And that we saw played out obviously in the presidential campaign. So as I kept reporting it the story kept shifting, but the basic story remained the same. And I was always, always would finish an interview and walk away and say, wow, there's something there I didn't know.

>> As I said there's probably about three or four people who hadn't heard of your book. I think a lot of them became aware of it during the

campaign. How did you react to the criticism that the book would affect your ability to be objective in moderating the vice presidential debate?

>> Yeah, there was a lot of conversation about that, and all of it by people who, A, didn't know what the book was about and, B, who didn't read it after it came out often. What I found interesting about that is that almost all the criticism assumed I was writing a book about Barack Obama and assumed, I think because I'm African-American, that it would be a puff piece about Barack Obama. And, therefore, once you take these assumptions it then ends up with she couldn't possibly be objective. But in fact when you unpack what I was doing I was writing a book about more than Barack Obama. I was writing a book about nothing less than a wholesale shift in African-American politics, which is a far more complicated story than just one man. And in addition to that at the time that I was preparing to moderate the debate I had very much on purpose not written the chapter about Barack Obama because the campaign was still underway and I didn't know where it was going to end. And because I'm a reporter I kind of had to report it out before I could write it. I couldn't reach my conclusions before I wrote the chapter. So the people who criticized me generally didn't understand what the book was about. And then secondarily didn't understand what I was trying to do and what kind of reporter I was trying to be.

>> There was enormous focus and obviously enormous viewership of the vice presidential debate last year. Especially given that kind of spotlight how does one prepare to moderate a debate? Well, I had moderated the vice presidential debate in 2004 so that was my first time doing it, and I had a sense of what was required. At the time it was John Edwards and Dick Cheney, and it didn't get the same attention this debate got for lots of reasons including Saturday Night Live and Sarah Pallin and all sorts of curious questions. And what happens going into these debates is people inundate you with their ideas about what questions you should ask. In 2004 the questions I got were for both candidates. In 2008 almost exclusively the questions I got unsolicited were for Sarah Pallin. And I had to remind people I was moderating a debate, not conducting an inquisition. So I had to set aside a lot of the storm and drum that was going on leading up to the debate and expectations for the vice presidential candidate and do exactly what I had done four years ago which is look at the vice presidential debate of which there is only one as an opportunity for Americans to finally make a decision about who they want a heartbeat away from the presidency. Take all the other stuff and set it aside. And assume that, as I do in my daily work, Americans are smart enough listening to the answers to decide whether the person is equipped or not to do that job, that very specific job. It wasn't my job to chase them around the table and shake my finger at them or to scold them or to come up with gotcha questions. It was my job, I thought about this in 2004 as well as 2008, which is how do I shed a light on who these people are beyond everything else you may or may not be reading. And by ignoring a lot of the other craziness and just focusing on that task I did pretty much the same job and had pretty much the same approach as I had four years ago. And I was gratified to discover that people were able to reach their own conclusions without the moderator telling them what they ought to think.

>> You mentioned Saturday Night Live, and that actually gives me a good segue because we went out to the Library of Congress's Twitter feed and Facebook page to ask people what questions they would want to ask you. Some more whimsical than others, and this question is did Queen Latifah do you justice on SNL? [Laughter]

>> The question is whether I do her justice. Queen Latifah four years ago also portrayed me on Saturday Night Live in their mockup or sendup of the vice presidential debate with Cheney and Edwards. But she was the guest host that year, and so this year I wondered what they were going to do. And I worried a little because the only option other than bringing back Queen Latifah was having one of the men on the show play me. And I had this vision of being played in drag. So I was first of all greatly relieved to see it was she and actually deeply amused by it. I thought it was hilarious. And being played by Queen Latifah is not the worst thing that can happen in life.

>> And thank goodness Tracy Morgan is no longer on the show, right?

>> There were a lot of fears, I had a lot of fears, Tracy Morgan or the other guy. I just thought this could be bad.

>> Another question from Facebook. Past or present who would you dream to interview?

>> Boy, I would liked to have interviewed Nelson Mandela about 20 years ago when he first was getting out of jail and was first dealing with the remaking of an entire nation. And talking about what it took for him to do that and where his head was all that time when he was so cut off from it. I think he would be a fascinating interview. I would like to have interviewed Sojourner Truth who is kind of a hero of mine partly because she was out there as a feminist and an African-American woman at a time when there was not much room or interest in listening to either. And she was very - - what drove her to that, what made here decide to do that. It was such an unusual place to be. People who I still have questions about and motivations, what made them do that when they could have easily just not. Nelson Mandela could have emerged from jail and ridden away as a national hero. But instead he decided to come out and remake the country. It's an amazing story which has been told a lot, but I'd love to hear it myself.

>> Now, in addition to your broadcast work you have the distinction of being a former reporter for both the Washington Post and the New York Times. What is your assessment of the current and maybe future state of print journalism?

>> Well, we're at a bleak period especially in print journalism trying to figure out exactly how we're going to do this and what the model is going to be. I don't know a single news organization, be it print or broadcast or even online, which isn't trying to figure out how do we position ourselves now for the future. And if they're not thinking about it they ought to be because it's not as it was when I was growing up where you read the paper in the morning and the afternoon. Now there's more afternoon papers, and then you came home and you sat around the table,

people don't sit around the table, and you watch Huntley-Brinkley. And there are not now three broadcasts but 85 broadcasts. And you can get your news a million different ways. So my great concern which I've had for years is that we lose the skill of understanding the difference between information and news and that there's a lot of information out there. If I log on my computer my home page for my internet provider is going to tell me what they decide the news is that day. It doesn't necessarily mean it's the most important news. It may be Jon and Kate Plus Eight. That may not be something I consider to be news. So I still think there need to be reliable places to go where you're going to find out the most important things that happen in the world. It's one of the reasons I work in public broadcasting. I know it's a reliable, safe place to get serious news which you just might not always get everywhere else in depth anymore.

>> Aside from the day-to-day is there anything else that's coming up for you, maybe any other books on the horizon?

>> You know, I go back to what I said first which is you've got to be passionate about it. Because the one thing I discovered about writing a book it's very much like giving birth which it's incredibly painful. You spend a lot of time focused completely on it and then it's over, and you begin to forget the pain and you start to think about doing it again. I haven't come up yet with the subject I would want to write about again. But having done it once I feel like, hey, I pulled it off, maybe I can try it again.

>> Well, we certainly look forward to hearing more from you at the National Book Festival. Why do you think the book festival and other book festivals are important?

>> Because we need to read. And because we have gotten to the point now where, as I was mentioning, all the different ways there are of getting information. I mean people aren't necessarily settling down with a good book anymore. But, yeah, I have found as I've traveled the country talking about this book there's an incredible hunger for real serious nonfiction and fiction but information. People want to get lost in learning things they didn't know about before. And we have to do what we can to continue to provide it to them and give them options. Everybody doesn't want to get their information that way. Everybody doesn't want to hold a book. But for those people who do, and there's quite a number, we've got to find a way to speak to them and to provide them what they need.

>> Well, the book once again *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*. Gwen Ifill thank you so much for your time today.

>> Thank you.

>> And we will hear more from you at the 2009 National Book Festival on Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. As always, free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the

Library of Congress this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.