

# THE BREAKTHROUGH





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*Politics and Race  
in the Age of Obama*

**GWEN IFILL**

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*For my parents, Oliver and Eleanor Ifill,  
who did not live to see the day*



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# THE BREAKTHROUGH





# INTRODUCTION

**I LEARNED HOW TO COVER RACE RIOTS BY TELEPHONE. THEY DIDN'T** pay me enough at my first newspaper job to venture onto the grounds of South Boston High School when bricks were being thrown. Instead, I would telephone the headmaster and ask him to relay to me the number of broken chairs in the cafeteria each day. A white colleague dispatched to the scene would fill in the details for me.

I've spent thirty years in journalism since then chronicling stories like that—places where truth and consequences collide, rub up against each other, and shift history's course. None of that prepared me for 2008 and the astonishing rise of Barack Obama.

It is true that he accomplished what no black man had before, but it went further than that. Simply as an exercise in efficient politics, Obama '08 rewrote the textbook. His accomplishment was historic and one that transformed how race and politics intersect in our society. Obama is the leading edge of this change, but his success is merely the ripple in a pond that grows deeper every day.

“When people do something that they've never done before, I think that makes it easier to do it a second time,” David Axelrod, the Obama campaign's chief strategist, told me just days after Obama won. “So when people vote for an African American candidate, I think it makes it easier for the next African American candidate.”

The next African American candidates (and a fair share of those already in office) subscribe to a formula driven as much by demographics as by destiny. When population shifts occur—brought about by fair housing laws, affirmative action, and landmark school desegregation rulings—political power is challenged as well. It happened in Boston, New York, Chicago, and every other big city reshaped by an influx of European immigration. It is happening again now in Miami and Los Angeles, in suburban Virginia and rural North Carolina, where the political calculus is being reshaped by Latino immigrants. With African Americans, freighted with the legacy of slavery and the pushback from whites who refuse to feel guilty for the sins of their ancestors, the shift has been more scattered and sporadic, yet no less profound.

When I began my journalism career at the *Boston Herald American* in 1977, Boston was awash in the sort of racial drama that foreshadows dramatic change. While I was attending Simmons College, the federal courts demanded that the city's very political school committee fix the city's racially unbalanced education system.

The solution, imposed by U.S. District Court judge W. Arthur Garrity in 1974, seemed pretty straightforward: send white children to schools in black neighborhoods and black children to schools in white neighborhoods. It came to be known as forced busing. The idea was to impose balance where it no longer existed. The optimistic reasoning was that the resources—teachers, textbooks, shared experience—would follow. But history now shows us that busing—moving twenty thousand students to and fro in search of quality education—was, in fact, a far more radical notion than originally envisioned.<sup>1</sup> It struck at the heart of neighborhood and racial identity in cities all over the nation, most memorably so in Irish South Boston and black Roxbury. White residents of insular neighborhoods railed—sometimes violently—against the incursion into their neighborhood schools. Black residents in Roxbury railed right back.

As I walked to my college classes in Boston's Fenway neighborhood that fall, I saw the result with my own eyes—Boston's finest in riot gear

stepping in to prevent clashes at English High School. It was a scene that played out again and again all over the city, all over the country.

“The white kids don’t like black kids and black kids don’t like white kids,” a white student said after one of the melees I covered by phone. “All of it is prejudice. All I know is that no one’s getting any education.”<sup>2</sup>

“It’s a perfect example that forced desegregation and forced busing does not work,” Elvira “Pixie” Palladino, an anti-busing member of the school committee, told me at the time.

White students fled the city schools during those years, so many that the majority-white city’s education system became majority-black within a decade. By 2000, only a quarter of the city’s children were white, and white children accounted for under 14 percent of enrollments in the city’s elementary schools.<sup>3</sup>

It took some years, and a more sophisticated understanding of how race and poverty intersect, for me to begin to understand that what I saw in Boston was about more than just black and white kids not liking each other. It was the beginning of a power shift that was defined by, but not limited to, race.

I moved to Baltimore in 1981, where the tipping point I had witnessed taking shape in Boston was a little further along. When I arrived, the city’s leaders were still mostly white, but 56 percent of the city’s residents were already nonwhite, a number that grew to 64 percent by 2000.<sup>4</sup>

On the surface, Baltimore’s political vibe was less charged than Boston’s, but the power shifts were no less significant. The city’s paternalistic mayor, William Donald Schaefer, had revived downtown with a national aquarium and a Disney-like harbor development that brought tourists in droves. Twin baseball and football stadiums were poised to sprout on downtown’s southern edge. Gleaming condominiums and hotels replaced what had been run-down waterfront docks. Schaefer was hailed in national magazines as an urban savior. Howard Cosell told a *Monday Night Football* audience that Schaefer was “the genius mayor.”<sup>5</sup>

But not far from the glittering downtown development most convention visitors saw, the picture was more complicated. Crime was climbing. The schools were sliding. And change was in the offing.

Schaefer, an unmarried curmudgeon used to getting his own way, was suspicious of change. And he was doubly suspicious of any call for change that seemed rooted in racial claims. That meant that he would also be suspicious of me, a black woman whose job it was to ask him questions he did not like. As he growled and snapped at me—and, honestly, at most other reporters too—I came to realize what I was witnessing: the friction that is a necessary by-product of sandpaper change.

In 1983, Billy Murphy, a black judge and scion of a prominent local family, decided to use the sandpaper. Schaefer was still immensely popular, but he was also aware that new minority majorities had recently swept black mayors into office for the first time in cities such as Atlanta, and that the barrier was about to fall that year in Philadelphia as well.

In the end, Murphy turned out to be a pretty inadequate Democratic primary candidate, disorganized and unfocused. Even though Andrew Young (then mayor of Atlanta), Martin Luther King III, and comedian and activist Dick Gregory came to town to campaign for Murphy, Schaefer still managed to snare fully half of the black vote in a majority-black city.<sup>6</sup>

In defeat, though, Murphy's challenge was enough to open some eyes to the possibility that the "mayor for life," as Schaefer had been dubbed, might be displaced. Perhaps it was time for a candidate who looked like most of the people who lived in the city. Schaefer hated this line of reasoning, openly detested Murphy, and refused to speak his name aloud. Still, he saw the handwriting on the wall.<sup>7</sup>

Four years later, Baltimore did get its black mayor when, after sixteen years in charge, Schaefer was elected governor and selected a successor to fill his unexpired term. Clarence "Du" Burns, the affable city council president who had risen to that position from humble beginnings as a locker room attendant, was only too happy to claim a job he might never have been able to win outright. "I got standing ovations

at churches,” Burns marveled years later. “I hadn’t done anything for them, but I was the first black mayor, y’understand?”<sup>8</sup>

Burns, who learned the ways of city politics behind every closed door at city hall, ended up spending seventeen years there, but only eleven months as mayor. The first time he ran for the job outright, Burns was defeated by a younger, politically unanointed Yale- and Harvard-educated attorney, a black man with the unlikely name of Kurt Schmoke. Schmoke had abandoned a prestigious post in the Carter White House to return home to Baltimore. “I thought, why did he give up working in the White House?” said his former White House colleague Christopher Edley Jr. “What’s going on? And he said, ‘I’m going to indict a few bad guys, make some connections in the corporate world, and run for office.’”

That is exactly what Schmoke did, first winning election as state’s attorney before making the run for city hall. Even though he was up against the well-oiled Schaefer machine, Schmoke defeated Burns by five thousand votes by capturing the imagination of Baltimore voters, black and white, in a way that neither Murphy nor Burns, with their old-school ties and backroom ways, could.

“I was kind of the beneficiary in a way of a change sparked by the latter end of the civil rights movement,” said Schmoke, who is now the dean of the Howard University School of Law, which produced Thurgood Marshall, L. Douglas Wilder, and Vernon Jordan. “The Voting Rights Act, which opened up so many opportunities throughout the country, started to hit its stride by 1980, and people built on that.”

That trend was also in evidence about forty minutes down the interstate highway in Prince George’s County, Maryland. By 1984, I had taken my unintentional road trip through sandpaper politics to this Washington suburb, where between 1980 and 1990 the African American population spurted from 37 percent to 50 percent. During that same period, nearly seventy-seven thousand whites moved elsewhere—a loss of nearly 20 percent of the county’s white population.<sup>9</sup>

The county's power structure was in the midst of a corresponding shift from mostly white to mostly black when I was covering it for the *Washington Post*. As occurred with Schmoke in Baltimore, the resulting friction provided for a memorable foreshadowing of what was later to be revealed on the national stage.

Wayne Curry was Prince George's County's version of Kurt Schmoke—but with a little backroom dealing experience thrown in for good measure. Smooth and politically astute, he learned early on to navigate the shoals of the backwater politics that had defined this collection of poor and middle-class black and white suburbs and tobacco-growing rural communities.

Middle-class blacks were thronging to Prince George's, replacing farmland with cul-de-sacs and even gated golf course communities. Between 1979 and 1989, the county's median household income, once adjusted for inflation, rose by 15 percent.<sup>10</sup> As a result, PG, as it was still derisively called by people who did not live there, had become the home of the most prosperous population of African Americans in the nation. By 2005, 66 percent of the county was black.<sup>11</sup>

Curry, who made his mark as a real estate development lawyer, parlayed his business connections into two terms as county executive from 1994 to 2002. Over the years, he managed to establish close ties to both the existing white political establishment and the emerging black one.

In his salad days, Curry was considered a rabble-rouser, a smooth talker who could speak the language of the moneyed developers and old-time pols who were together plotting the county's future. In short, he was the kind of guy who made white and black people nervous. Fifty-eight years old and watching from the sidelines those following in his footsteps, Curry has mixed feelings about the generation of black politicians now rising. "I don't automatically see it as a good thing," he told me. "I think it could be a very, very discouraging moment, in fact, if once guys get in those positions they don't have an idea or theory about who to help or why—just to become figureheads that

aren't doing much of anything to make it better for people across the board." Elected as a Hillary Clinton delegate to the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Curry endorsed Obama only after Clinton dropped out in June.

Curry's concerns echo throughout any discussion of black politics today. What is the point of electing African Americans to high office if their ties to the black community do not bind them tightly enough to black causes? Is a black candidate who, for instance, opposes affirmative action a breakthrough worth having? Or as Georgetown sociology professor Michael Eric Dyson put it to me: "If this is the price we pay for that kind of access, we'd rather not have it."

By the time the *Post* assigned me to cover the Reverend Jesse Jackson's second presidential race in 1988, I had grown familiar with variations on this argument, which usually cropped up whenever a new black face intruded on a previously all-white, and sometimes all-black, political landscape. The toughest tests often played out from within the black community itself, where in most cases political achievement and the conflict that came with it were only a generation old.

In 1984, Jackson ran for president, doubled the number of black voters casting ballots in that year's New York primary, and startled the political world with his powerful "I am somebody" imagery and his unabashedly racial appeals. It did not bother him one bit to use the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. as part of that imagery, in part because he had been a witness to it.

"On April 4, 1968, there was a crucifixion in Memphis," he would say while campaigning. "In New York this week, we began to roll the stone away. The crucifixion of April 1968 will become the resurrection of April 1984."

Jackson scared people, and he was perfectly aware of it. The headline in that week's *Time* magazine reflected the nervous political zeitgeist of the moment: "What Does Jesse Really Want?"<sup>12</sup>

Jackson's 1988 run was different from his more quixotic 1984 candidacy. By then, white faces had joined the black faces on the Jackson

bandwagon. His campaign manager, Gerald Austin, was a white man. And some of his most influential supporters—including Democratic operatives Harold Ickes and Ann Lewis—would go on four years later to help get Bill Clinton elected. Jackson had worked energetically to reach beyond his black church base to establish himself as a force to be reckoned with.

“My friend Gary is out of the race,” he told a crowd at a predominantly Hispanic Denver Roman Catholic parish where former senator Gary Hart sat in the front pew. “That makes me Colorado’s favorite son.”<sup>13</sup>

Jackson’s ability to enlarge his base continued to rattle the political establishment. He emerged the victor of the 1988 Michigan primary. This time, the *Time* magazine cover line shrieked: “Jesse!?”<sup>14</sup> Writers began to speculate that he would sweep lily-white Wisconsin too.

I interviewed the mayor of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, during that period.<sup>15</sup> Upon meeting me, he anxiously pointed out the framed pictures he had on his wall of boxers and other athletes, to prove that some of his best friends were black. I was surprised only that he actually said this to my face, and the exchange convinced me that maybe this was not Jackson country. The following week, Michael Dukakis trounced Jackson in the Democratic primary, not only in Sheboygan but in all the rest of Wisconsin as well.

Still, there was something happening here. Jackson’s supporters were made up of far more than the traditional civil rights constituency. They were, in fact, the left-wing version of the very same people who flocked to rallies that year for another man of the cloth, Pat Robertson.

Everywhere he went, Jackson preached a now-familiar sermon—the power of hope. Obama would appropriate that powerful theme decades later. Jackson’s effort eventually crumbled amid intraparty acrimony, but by the time the August convention rolled around he had won in more than a dozen contests, and there were a breathless few months where much seemed possible.

That spring, Jackson frequently told a story on the stump about a white man who had approached him in Beaumont, Texas, to tell him

that he too had attended the famous Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march in Alabama in 1965. But, the man told Jackson, he'd been there with the Ku Klux Klan. Time had passed, priorities had changed, and now, the man said, he was supporting him.<sup>16</sup>

“Even extremes learn to come together to survive,” Jackson preached.

The more possible the nomination seemed, the more Jackson attempted to broaden his appeal. He kissed a lot of white babies for photographers that spring and suddenly started eschewing talk of storming the gates in favor of more mainstream rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> “I don’t understand boundless liberalism,” he told the Women’s Economic Club of Detroit. “Neither do I understand static conservatism.”

“We opened up an exclusive club and turned the mainstream into a flowing river,” he told me at the time. “By broadening the stream, my views are now in the center.”<sup>18</sup>

These voters felt disenfranchised. Their conviction that no one was listening or speaking to them was about more than race. It was about shared grievance too. Even before Michael S. Dukakis captured the Democratic nomination, Willie Brown, the canny San Francisco mayor who served as Jackson’s national campaign chairman, correctly began calling the campaign the “Jackson movement.”<sup>19</sup>

The political part of the movement stuttered to a halt after Dukakis refused to pick Jackson as his running mate. But as the Democrats prepared to convene in Atlanta to nominate their ticket, the resourceful Chicago preacher did not immediately leave the stage. He took his entourage by bus from Illinois to Georgia. Along the way, the vanquished candidate stopped at a rally at Jefferson Street Baptist Church in Nashville, where he spoke in front of a large banner strung behind the pulpit. *JESSE YOU’RE A WINNER*, it read.

But even that would not work out as planned. As Jackson spoke, the banner behind his head began to sag and peel. Organizers struggled to right the banner, then remove it. But as it fell, its weight ripped a second banner almost in half. That one read: *WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?*

Still, Jackson managed a breakthrough of sorts, one that went beyond politics. Everywhere, the terrain was changing. Black politicians were going mainstream. Twenty years later, network cameras would capture Jackson standing in Chicago's Grant Park, tears streaming down his face, as Obama walked onstage to accept the presidency.

In 1990, L. Douglas Wilder, a Korean War veteran who was raised in Richmond, Virginia, and attended that city's segregated schools, was elected the commonwealth's sixty-sixth governor—and the nation's first African American state leader ever. But he won the election by a lead far narrower than preelection polls had predicted. This came to be known as the “Bradley effect,” after former Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, an African American who lost the 1982 race for California governor to a white man, George Deukmejian, even though polls had shown him winning by as much as twenty-two points.<sup>20</sup>

“People lied!” Wilder told me years later, but months before Obama would be elected. “And they will continue to lie. Racism is never going to go away, and we shouldn't convince ourselves that it could.”

There has, however, been considerable debate about the Bradley effect. One Deukmejian pollster said the conclusion was based entirely on the speculation of respected California pollster Mervin Field, who had no other way to explain why his preelection polling was off the mark. “The Bradley Effect was born amidst some major polling errors and a confusing array of mixed predictions, hardly a firm foundation to construct a theory,” pollster V. Lance Tarrance Jr. wrote twenty-six years later.<sup>21</sup> Obama himself called the theory “outdated and overstated.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the question of how voters behaved in secret when faced with a racial choice increasingly cut the opposite way. In the 2006 midterm elections, African Americans lost four out of five statewide races. But in those cases, their losses were foreshadowed—accurately—in preelection polling.<sup>23</sup> Harold Ford Jr., who ran and lost a race for U.S. Senate, actually drew more votes overall, not just white votes, on Election Day than the last polls had predicted he would.

Obama continued that trend. Exit polls showed not only that he outperformed 2004 nominee John Kerry among white voters but also that those who made up their minds within the last few days—theoretically the secret, lying racists of the Bradley effect—voted for him as well. RIP, the Bradley effect.

Once again, Obama became the most famous example of a trend that was already taking hold largely out of the public eye. Other African Americans have also successfully attracted white support over the years, many of them in local and state government. In 1996, environmentalist and county council member Ron Sims, who marched in civil rights protests with his parents while he was growing up in Spokane, Washington, was appointed to the top executive's job in Seattle's overwhelmingly white King County and has since been re-elected twice.<sup>24</sup> By 2007, there were 622 black state legislators, 30 percent of them from predominantly white districts. In 2001, only about 16 percent of the black legislators represented majority-white areas.<sup>25</sup>

The evolution that has brought us to our latest sandpaper crossroads has been as much generational as racial. Black mayors have been elected, with significant white support, in Cincinnati, Ohio; Buffalo, New York; and even Iowa City—part of a wave of more than forty African Americans now running American cities.

Barack Obama's historic 2008 presidential campaign touched on all the themes I have covered throughout my career and all of the layers of meaning that run through black politics. Ambition, aspiration, fear, folly—all were on display as Obama boarded the roller coaster that ultimately led to the White House. And as he took on that ultimate political challenge, America's conflicts about race were laid bare, again and again.

Edward W. Brooke, who was elected Massachusetts attorney general in 1962 and four years later became the nation's first post-Reconstruction black U.S. senator, believes that if his state was ready four decades ago, the rest of the country might be now.

"I would love to see a lot of things happen between now and the time I lay me down to rest," said Brooke, now retired and living in

Florida, where he is encouraged by the rise of a new generation of black politicians. “All I’m saying is that you can’t win unless you run. You’ve got to have that fire in the belly, that desire to achieve, to win that position, and to do something with it when you do win.”

Obama sent Brooke a copy of one of his books, inscribed “Thank you for paving the way.” Brooke responded with a signed copy of his own autobiography, in which he called Obama “a worthy bearer of the torch.”<sup>26</sup> But the passing of the torch has been fraught with all of the insecurities and rivalries that can be brought on by consequential change. Hovering over every conflict for these breakthrough candidates has always been the question of race.

A career spent watching politicians of every gender, color, and creed trying to sort their way through the abrasions of political change has taught me much. I’ve witnessed the uneasy transition from the civil rights struggle to direct engagement in electoral politics. As black politicians have broken through, I’ve documented the friction that has resulted when new realities, demographic as well as political, confront established customs and institutions.

So it should have come as no surprise to me when I was briefly caught up in the crosswinds of the very conflict I’d spent the past years documenting. But it did. Barely twenty-four hours before I was to moderate the season’s only vice presidential debate, John McCain supporters decided to stir the pot (and, they imagined, throw me off balance) by suggesting that they had just discovered that this book was to be a piece of pro-Obama puffery.

It was easy enough to discover that this was not true. The book and its true topic had been hiding in plain sight for more than a year as I interviewed dozens of subjects and wrote on the topic for more than one national magazine. But I was a hard target to resist—an African American journalist writing about race could not possibly be capable of thinking bigger thoughts, could she?

In retrospect, this was a small distraction that blew over the second the debate ended. And I quickly came to realize that my brush

with sandpaper politics was a mere scratch compared to the struggles of African American politicians who had been fighting to establish a political beachhead for decades before I—or Barack Obama, for that matter—ever came along.

The difference now is that in the twenty-first century, the breakthrough generation of black politicians is aiming to capture much bigger territory. Obama's relentless and disciplined giant-slaying campaign is by no means the only story. This book will tell the rest.