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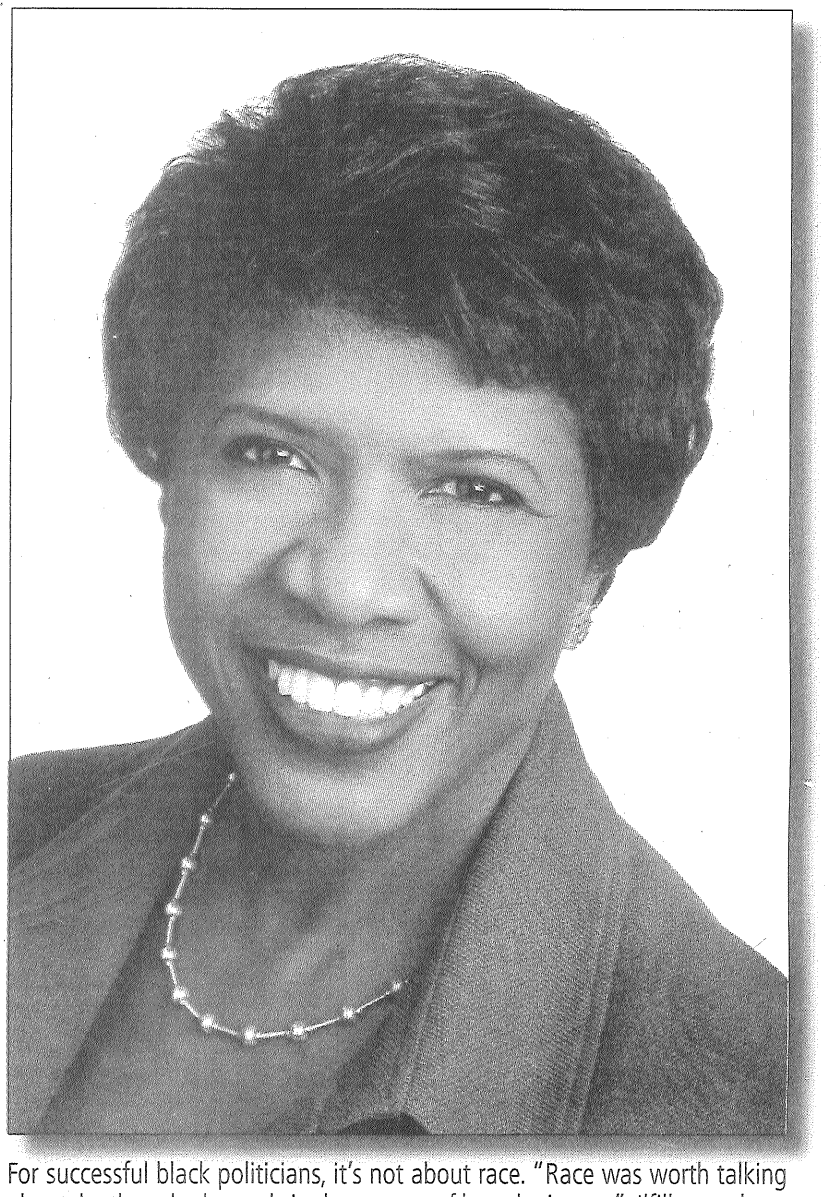
The great moderator

Noted journalist Gwen Ifill Talks Palin, politics, race, and her "Black Moment" in the age of Obama



For successful black politicians, it's not about race. "Race was worth talking about, he thought, but only in the context of broader issues," Ifill says about Obama in "The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama."

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

Not long into the sole vice presidential debate last October, Sarah Palin cheerfully announced to moderator Gwen Ifill and the roughly 69.9 million viewers tuned into the broadcast that she was not going to answer questions. Instead, she said, she would talk straight to the American people. In reaction to which, Ifill, the senior correspondent for "The Newshour with Jim Lehrer" and the face of the popular PBS program "Washington Week," admitted to almost blurting out: "Really?"

Fortunately, said Ifill at a recent appearance at the Study Hotel at Yale, she held her tongue. The seemingly indefatigable reporter, who also periodically appears on "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," shared with the animated sold-out crowd of 150 what she had learned from moderating a debate between Dick Cheney and John Edwards in 2004. "People who are watching are really smart," she said. They get when politicians are sidestepping issues. There was no need for me to pound on the table."

At least one member of the Palin clan did choose to engage with the veteran newswoman. It was Palin's father, Chuck Heath, who approached her after the debate. Ifill had her foot in a splint propped up on a box underneath her desk, having tripped on some stairs and broken her ankle two nights before. "He said 'Heard you've got a bum hoof,'" recalled Ifill.

The broken ankle, of course, was only part of the story. Conservative bloggers had been attempting to hobble Ifill's neutrality on the grounds that she was writing a "pro-Obama" book set to be released around Inauguration Day. Even the cast of "Saturday Night Live" got in on the act, performing a skit about the debate, with Ifill (played by Queen Latifah) repeatedly holding up her book to the camera.

As it turns out, "The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama," which Ifill was promoting in the event sponsored by R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison, is not primarily about Obama. Indeed, it contains just one chapter on how he won the election, an analysis that Ifill had yet to pen on the night of the much ballyhooed debate. After all, "how could I write the conclusion before I knew how it would end?" she asked.

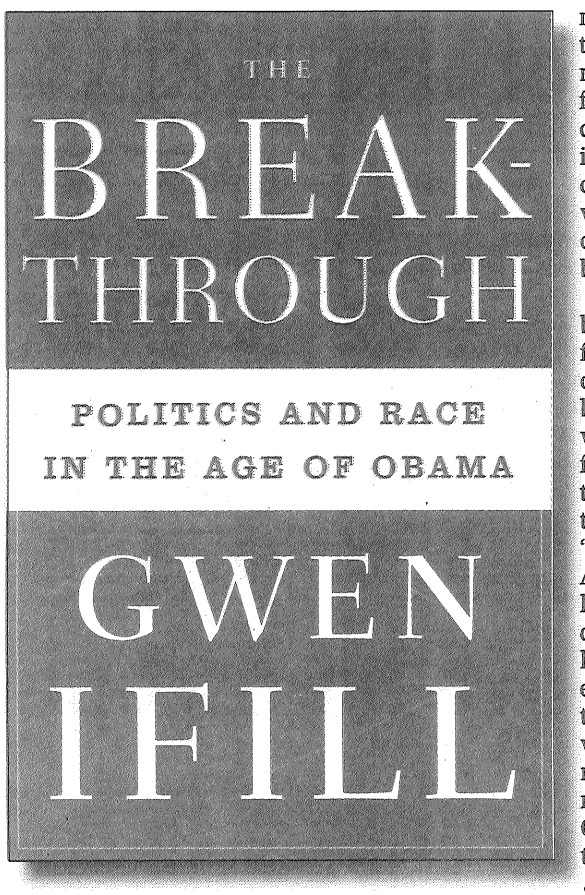
The book's value, in fact, is that it treats Obama not as the breakthrough politician but as one member of a breakthrough generation of African Americans that includes, among others, Newark Mayor Cory Booker and Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts. These are politicians for whom being black is a vital attribute but not a defining one and certainly, not a limiting one. The key to their success, Ifill said, is that they avoid exhibiting any sense of grievance, which tends to frighten white voters.

This was precisely what explains the failure of Reverend Jesse Jackson's bid for the Oval Office in 1988, said Ifill, who spent her formative years in journalism covering lesser-known candidates in presidential campaigns. Jackson was an interesting case study. He had a way of making a white reporter who asked him a hard question feel racist. As for black reporters: "you asked him a hard question and he would give you a look as if to say,'what would your mama think about that?'"

Obama, in contrast, didn't make race an issue, either with reporters or with the electorate. When given the opportunity to broach the issue of race in the ways most expected to hear, she said, he desisted. "Race was worth talking about, he thought, but only in the context of broader issues."

This strategy is not uncommon among breakthrough politicians. Indeed, as Ifill discovered, the successful ones start from the outside by appealing to white voters first and then working back toward their base of black voters.

This "outside-in way" is a different approach to the same problem: how to elect an African American in a country where African Americans make up a fraction of the population. The traditional dynamic of a black leadership focused solely on, and fully beholden to, the black community who elected them, is gone, Ifill maintains. The future is in building coalitions on larger issues like health care and education which expands a candidate's political base.



Gwen Ilfill spoke at The Study Hotel at Yale recently as part of her book tour, sponsored by R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison.

Predictably, this break has created friction with the older generation of black politicians whose protests for civil rights in the 1960s paved the way for the "Age of Obama" African-American leaders. That their direct beneficiaries have rejected these elders' admonitions to wait their turn was so stinging a rebuke as to cause many of them, in Obama's case, to throw their support, at least initially, behind Hillary Clinton.

"They never had to march in protest," Ifill said, in describing the younger cadre of politicians. "Or sit at lunch counters." Middle-class and Ivy-League educated, "they don't have access issues. They know they can get access, they just have to take advantage of it."

It is precisely their backgrounds — in particular, their comfort in multiracial situations — that has enabled these politicians to surmount one of their main hurdles to elected office: "to convince enough white voters that they're on their side, that they're just like them."

But it wasn't solely a matter of putting whites at ease. "As quietly as it was kept," Ifill said, Obama's most formidable challenge, at least in the early stages of his campaign, was to win over black voters who were with Hillary Clinton until his unexpected victory in the Iowa primary convinced them he could win.

There were, of course, factors external to race that contributed to Obama's astounding rise, Ifill allowed: the dysfunction in Hillary Clinton's campaign; the ill-advised choice of Sarah Palin; the economic freefall, and, not least, Obama's temperament.

That he and his family now inhabit the White House is no doubt cause for celebration, said Ifill, but in no way signals that the nation has entered a "postracial" period, a view posited by some younger black leaders, though not by Obama himself.

"The country still has a long way to go to heal the racial divide," she said, citing the words of Henry Louis Gates that Obama's election "does not erase the bloody stain of history" and what Condoleeza Rice calls "our national birth defect."

That said, Ifill has no qualms, in spite of the October kerfuffle, about expressing how thrilled she is that Americans elected him president. She recounted the moment on election night when, in the midst of reading exit polls and number-crunching on the PBS set, she heard Jim Lehrer say: "And Barack Obama is the 44th president of the United States."

At which point, "I had to stop for a minute. And everyone said 'are you okay?' And I told them, 'I'm fine. I'm just having a black moment.' And then I went right on back to work."