

POTUS BARACK OBAMA VOICE OVER: What does it mean to be an American? The stories and habits of mind that bind us together as a people.

For most Americans growing up in the '50s, the answers were pretty simple. We were hardworking and freedom loving. Rugged individualists with a can-do spirit. We opened up the frontier and built mighty industries and allowed everybody to get their piece of the American Dream. We were on the right side of history; having defeated Hitler and liberated Europe. We now stood sentinel against a godless, totalitarian communism - to make the world safe for democracy. We watched the same TV shows and listened to the same radio programs. We loved Westerns and baseball, hotdogs and apple pie, fast cars and Fourth of July parades.

That's the story we told ourselves anyway. But it wasn't the whole story. It left a bunch of stuff out. Whether it was the continuing discrimination against brown and Black people. Or all the ways that women were still expected to stay in their place. Or some of the ugly realities of our foreign policy during the Cold War. Bruce and I came of age as young people were challenging a lot of America's most cherished myths about itself. The result was a growing bitter divide in the country. A political and culture war that in a lot of ways we're still fighting today.

But before we got in the heavy stuff, I got behind the wheel of the vintage Corvette that Bruce keeps in his barn. And we went for a little joy ride. One that didn't make my Secret Service details all that happy. For us, it was a symbol for our shared all-American love affair with the open road...

[plucky electric guitar strings strum]

[Loud muscle car ignition misfires]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Uh oh.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's alright, you're alright.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I don't want to—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Just give it some gas.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Oh.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You got to give it gas.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Come on, Bruce.

[Engine starts]

[plucky electric guitar strings play]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah gas.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: There we go.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: All you need is gas... And as you pull it back, give it a little juice.

[Engine rumbles]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Come on!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* AHHHHH HAAAAAAA!

[Cadillac Ranch by Bruce Springsteen starts playing under]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's time for us to go!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know what? Should we go somewhere?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Do we have to stay on the farm or can we go off the farm?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Can I go off the farm?.. I know the Secret Service is scrambling right now.

[Engine roars]

[Cadillac Ranch by Bruce Springsteen continues to play]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* How's that baby feel?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I'm in trouble, but you know what? There are times where you just got to do—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You gotta do what you gotta do.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You got to do something, man.

[Engine roars]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Ahhh! *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah buddy!

[Cadillac Ranch by Bruce Springsteen: "Cadillac, Cadillac... Long and dark... shiny and black... Open up your engines let 'em roar... Tearin' up the highway... like a big ol' dinosauuuuur..."]

[music fades to radio]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Ohhhhhhhhhhh!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: This is the ticket right here.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You're going to take it, going right in here.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right, this one right here?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yup. Ahhhh ha! Had to do it!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Had to do it!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Had to put the foot down. That's a classic, man. We'll remember that one. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Come on, man!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We'll remember that one.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Shoot!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

[radio turns off]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Had to try that out!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Great ride, brother B. Great ride, brother B.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's just... we got rolling and I thought...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I tried to get him to go to Freehold, but... *[laughs]*

[door opens]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: People, I know we're late. It's Bruce's fault.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It is.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Ugh... Ah everybody set? Everybody's ready... I assume. OK. So a theme in a lot of your songs, a theme in a lot of Rock n' Roll, is this idea of the open road and traveling—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: out of where you've been and..and towards the horizon—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: and maybe not knowing where it is that you're going—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And that's tied to ideas of freedom, and it's tied to ideas of remaking yourself.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Shedding your skin, freeing yourself from your past and your constraints. Uh and engaging in the act of recreation, self-invention.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The act of driving the car is... it's a...it's a direct, aggressive act upon the world, you know?

BOTH: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And that was just funny because I did not drive until I was 24.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Really?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Didn't drive the car.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Huh.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Hitchhiked everywhere I went from 14 to 24.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You didn't— You didn't— You didn't uh think to yourself, "Man, I need to try to get some wheels"?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Ugh...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Did you not have a license? Or you just didn't have a car?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I did not have a license and I did not know how to drive.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Let me just say— Can I just interrupt to say it is a good thing that you ended up being a rockstar.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: 'Cause otherwise it seems to me like you're kind of a shy... you know, not that well adjusted kid, man.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I mean... Shhhh... Like I wasn't a big car guy but shit I was gon'— I was gonna to get my license—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* Not me!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I was going so I could get out on the road.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well, I was out on the road but—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You're hitchhiking!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I was out on the road with just me and my thumb. And for about, literally, the 10 years from when I was 14— I had two albums out. I was still hitchhiking myself around. I didn't have a car.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: What are you doing with girls, man?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: They got cars! You know. They had cars or - I mean, you have to understand I'm going all the way from Asbury Park to... Sea Bright, which is Freehold. It's a total about 15 miles, you know, I'm not going anywhere.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I don't have a trip to go on. Except my first actual trip, which was a trip to California...

[Electric guitar strum plays under]

I took in...

[Ambient sound Chevy engine rumbles under]

...it was a '48 Chevy similar to the one that's in my garage over there. And... it was just me and another guy, and we lost all the guys behind us who were the drivers. They were in a station wagon with a mattress in the back sleeping and resting and driving. They got lost in Nashville. There's no cell phones. We can't call somebody to find out where they are. Those days when somebody was lost that was it. You weren't going to hear them again until you got to California, and we were going to California thousands of miles away. So, we had three days to make it to a gig we had in Big Sur. To make it in three days you cannot stop driving.

So the nightfall came and my buddy said, "Hey, it's your turn." *[laughs]* "You're going to get us killed, man, I can't drive this freakin' — I can't drive a car I can't drive this freaking truck." He says, "If we don't drive, we don't get there in time. If we don't get there in time, we don't get paid. If we don't get paid, we don't have any money because it's taken us all our money to get across the damn country." So, I got behind the wheel.

[Acoustic guitar strumming playing]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Four-speed manual, gearshift, big ol' '48 Chevy flatbed with all of our equipment piled in the back. Right?

BOTH: *[Laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: How— How many times did you strip the gears?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Oh, many. All you hear was erghhh, erghhh erghhh erghhh.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So finally, "Hey, man, I can't handle this." Yeah, so the guy says, "Wait a second, I got an idea." He gets in the driver's seat...

[Engine sounds]

He puts it into first. Gets us rolling. "Let's switch seats." We switch seats! And...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You drive in first.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I'm drivin'...I didn't...No, I'm driving as long as the truck is going, now I can go from first to second to third—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Oh okay. Got it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know? I'm alright shifting in between those gears.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So we... I may drive 100 miles at a pop like that. You know?

BOTH: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Because out in the middle of the country—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You can do that! You know? And I did that! I did it for two days and that was how I learned how to drive.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

[Acoustic guitar strumming fades out]

[Car engine sounds go into distant and fade]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: But no— I— I... My own experience outside of what I've written in song was a lot more tentative when it came to driving. You know?

BOTH: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I didn't have all— I got all these cars in this garage now, you know, you were just tearing up the highway in my Corvette. But ah I..I couldn't drive. I couldn't fix a car if it broke down. But I knew what they were about. Right? I knew what they symbolized—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Escape.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right. I knew the statement they made. You know, this was a moment when A). America still felt very, very big. Very big. And the road was romantic. But it was also, I was very interested in... in writing music using classic American images and reinventing them for what at that time were the '70s. The '60s, yeah the Beach Boys, Chuck Berry alright, cars

and girls, cars and girls. I don't want to write about cars and girls because I want to write classic Rock n' Roll music. And so I took those images and I... the main thing I did is I used those images, but I filled my songs with the dread that was in the air during the '70s...

[Stolen Car by Bruce Springsteen plays under]

During the Vietnam War. The country was no longer innocent. The country was no longer wide open. Ah... it was an age, a new age of limits. Gas crisis – lines at the...at the stations. So, I... uh... I presented all of my characters in the context of those same images but in a new American age.

[Stolen Car by Bruce Springsteen plays: "That tore us apart and made us weep... And I'm driving a stolen car...]

How did they resonate? Much darker. Where were people going? They weren't sure where they were going. Who were they becoming? They weren't sure who they were becoming.

[Stolen Car by Bruce Springsteen plays: "But I ride by night and I travel in fear...]

All of these ideas I had to place in those cars with my characters and try to get them to sort them out.

[Stolen Car by Bruce Springsteen fades out]

[AD BREAK]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So for me part of the essential aspect of being an American is getting out of where you are. Now, where I am is paradise — in Hawaii, right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, you want to get out. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, you're somehow thinking, "Man, I gotta get out in the open road."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And you're on an island! *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The road only goes so far! I remember the first... the first time that I visited the mainland of the United States.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It was my... my mother and my grandmother decided it was time for me to see it. And so the two of them, me and my then 2-year-old sister.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We fly first to Seattle, which is where my mom had gone to high school. We take the Greyhound bus down to San Francisco—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: L.A. Then take the train to Arizona...

[Archive of Arizona commercial: "A place where the sky is blue beyond fathoming..."]

Kansas City up to Chicago...

[Archive of Chicago commercial: "Chicago is something you just got to see for yourself..."]

Rent a car, go to Yellowstone...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

[Archive of Yellowstone: "The oldest, largest and one of our most beautiful vacation lands is Yellowstone National Park..."]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: My mother didn't drive. She didn't have a license.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: My grandmother drove but she's starting to go a little blind.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: OK.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, I remember being put in the front seat at around twilight so that I can direct my grandmother *[laughs]* properly as we're hitting some of these turns in the road.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And, you were talking about the country being so big, I mean I remember looking out a Greyhound buses and looking out of trains—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Sure.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: and looking out of car windows...

[Guitar strumming plays]

Just miles of corn or miles of desert, or miles of forest, or miles of mountains and just thinking, “Man, imagine where you can go. You can go anywhere and by implication you can do anything and be anybody.” Right? And that first road trip, which I still remember. And, you know, we’d stop at Howard Johnson’s.

[T.V. switches on]

[Archive of vintage Howard Johnson’s commercial: “You’ll see that being a kid is more fun at Howard Johnsons...”]

[Ambi of kids screaming with excitement]

All the excitement was... the ice machine. And... you know... uh... your mom or your grandma springin—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: for a can of soda. And if you were really lucky, a couple of them had a little pool in the back.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Loved it.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And if if there was a pool that was...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Heaven on Earth!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That’s... That was it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* You were living.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That was luxury.

[Archive tape of Sen. Howard Baker questioning Mr. Haldeman at the Watergate Hearing: “Now you were closer to the President of the United States more often than probably any other person in the world outside of his immediate family. What did the president know and when did he know it?...”]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: This is ‘72, so this is in the middle of the Watergate Hearings. Every night...

[Archive tape of Sen. Howard Baker questioning Mr. Haldeman at the Watergate Hearing: “about the Watergate...”]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: My mom would turn on a little black and white set that was in the motel.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And we'd sit there and I'd be watching Sam Ervin and—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Danny Inouye... we were very proud because Danny Inouye was on the committee—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Hawaiian, yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And he was the senator from Hawaii.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Um...A World War II hero.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Only had one arm. And uh that probably was somewhat formative of my politics, right? Because my mother is saying you know the whole time, "What do you expect? The guy was a McCarthyite!" You know. But that set of memories I never lost.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And it was—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Nice memories.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And it was consistent with my own sense that as much as I loved Hawaii, I was going to have to go on some sort of journey in order to find out who I was. I remember when I was in college, you know, I got an old beat up Fiat — terrible car.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And I'd just go driving. It was broke in the shop probably once every ah two weeks, but it zipped around when it was working. Five-shift. And ah I remember it breaking down on highways between L.A. and San Francisco, and me having to hitchhike with truckers and, you know, get off on the Clover Leaf.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's pouring down rain and and you don't have a cell phone, you don't have any money. Maybe you got a little bit of change, you got to find a pay phone and see if you're going to be able to get a friend of yours who's in town to come pick you up and trying to look around to see what street you're on. But at each juncture... At each juncture there was always that sense of...

[Muted electric guitar strumming plays under]

Which I do think is a sense is essentially American, of you go on the road to discover like Ulysses, like— like—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right. Your hegira. It's a trip to discover your soul.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You— You are finding out what you are made of.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right. Who you are.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And it's full of surprises and adventures, but what's also true is that you get on the road and then at a certain point what you realize is, "Yes, you can remake yourself. Yes, you can find yourself. But at the end of the day, you still have this longing for a home and a place."

[Muted guitar strumming fades out]

And the tension of America is this sense of – We want to remake ourselves and and and reinvent ourselves and be free, but we also want a neighborhood and there's a loneliness to the road that...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Oh man.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The darker side of the road is that that drifter, that lonely, unrooted, unmoored—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well that...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: place.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And that we were talking about the other day about masculinity and icons. Those were the icons that were being sold to us: Western heroes. They were lonely. They were never fathers, never husbands, always passing through.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah those cowboys, Gary Cooper, Clint Eastwood—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Always passing through—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Shane...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: High... Plains... Drifter.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: High Plains Drifter.

BOTH: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Drifter, you know? And the ultimate example of this is in John Ford's "The Searchers"—

["The Searchers" Max Steiner - Reunion of Ethan and Debbie Score fades in]

When you have John Wayne, who's a misanthrope. He has a series of violent skills that he can use to impact and preserve the community, but he can't join a community. There's this profound scene at the end of "The Searchers" where John Wayne finds Natalie Wood after the whole movie—

[Audio of "The Searchers" John Wayne: "Let's go home Debbie"]

["The Searchers" Max Steiner - Home Again Score fades to the End Title plays]

Brings her back to the family, the whole family runs inside the house, the door closes and John Wayne is in the doorway and the door and community itself closes on him and he is left walking off into the desert. And that's the final shot of the film.

["The Searchers" Max Steiner - Home Again: "He knows he'll find, but where ol' lord where... fades out]

As a young man, I felt like this a lot and I tried to live that out well into my 30s until literally I was driving across the country with a friend of mine, and we'd taken several trips, I'd been across the country a bunch of times by now. Always enjoyed it, I said, "If I had the blues, man, those miles could just... I'd just roll those blues away, you know?" But I got to California and ah... I felt terrible. I felt like I wanted to get in the car and go back. But then I knew but if I did that I'd want to get in the car and come back again. I truthfully didn't want to stop moving... And something felt really broken inside of me. And that's when I called a friend, I called John, I said, "I'm having some real problems." He got me a number. And I went into a gentlemen's office I'd never seen before in my life in Beverly Hills or the Pacific Palisades, somewhere in L.A. I looked at him. It was a little ol' man with white hair and a mustache. There was an empty chair. I sat down in it and I just broke out and cried for ten minutes.

And... it was these two chickens coming home to roost the desire to quote, in theory, be free but the deep need now at my age for roots, family, a real home, a spiritual home, the need to stop running. To claim, to make choices, I'm going to be with you for my life. I'm going to live here during my life. I'm going to work this job during my life. And these are the things I'm committed and I'm committing myself to: our love, our endeavours, our place. I ran into a moment in my life when I needed to make those choices in order to live on and to have a life... to have a life... you know? Eh ah my life changed on that day and shortly later I got married, ah didn't work out the first time. But shortly there after that I met Patti and built a home and realized, "Hey, I still go out there on the road, I hit the motorcycles out there once in a while, you know, a couple thousand miles and come back." And uh now ah, I don't feel much like it anymore. Though you and I could jump in that Corvette and go to Route 66 though Michelle and Patti might kick our asses. Right? *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah... I don't know how far we'd get.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know, look ah... that idea of being domesticated—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Is something that part of the American character, particularly American male character, is taught to resist.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And yet, contrary to the song of a great American master, we're generally not born to run.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Ah, most of us are born to run a little bit and go back home.

[Acoustic guitar picking plays]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Uh and ah... And so for me, Michelle and Chicago... Chicago first became my home and then Michelle became an embodiment of that connection I had made to a place and a community. And the interesting thing is by virtue of finding that place, I was then actually able to understand Hawaii as also my place.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Because now I could see ah how uh all the various parts of me fit together.

[Acoustic guitar picking fades out]

[AD BREAK]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So one of the things we talk a lot about, Bruce, is... What is it that is essentially American? What's uniquely American? And and you and I, we've talked about this, you through your music, me through my politics, you know, part of what we've been trying to do is to define a vision of this country and our part in it, our place in it. Do you remember a moment when you just thought, consciously, "I'm an American, and and and that is part of my identity.?"

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I think ugh... my first recollection of it would be at 8 A.M. every morning at Saint Rose School. I pledge allegiance to the flag...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Of the United States of America.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. Facing the flag. You've got your hand over your heart. That, I think, is when I first identified myself and thought there was a sacredness about being an American.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: For me... Another big moment... was...

The space program...

[Archive audio of Apollo 11 Launch: T-minus 10, 9, 8, we have a go for double engine start. We have main engine starts. 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, lift off...]

[synth chord plays]

And the reason it was especially important was because the Apollo program... when the capsules land with those parachutes in the middle of the Pacific...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: They get brought to Hawaii.

[Archive audio of Apollo 11 Recovery News Clip: "The big swarms now spraying the hatchet area and the top deck and around the hatch on the command module with it..."]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So I remember, one of my earliest memories is sitting on my grandfather's shoulders with one of those little American flags you're talking about.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And... I guarantee you that we were probably so far back and where the capsule and the astronaut... My grandfather would be like, "Yeah! That's ah... Neil Armstrong waved at you." *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Exactly.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And I'm sure that wasn't the case, but... in your memory you thought, "I'm a fellow countryman of that guy who was just in space."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "That's what we do."

[Archive of Neil Armstrong on Returning to Earth after Apollo 11: We're just pleased to be back and we look forward to just getting out of this quarantine and talking without having glass between us...]

[synth music fades]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And then for me, the interesting thing was at 6 I go overseas. Ironically, one of the one of the ways that I became strongly patriotic was being outside the country. 'Cause now you realize what we have. So, my mother would explain that where we're living in Indonesia, this is a military government, but in America you elect people—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And everybody has a voice. Now, now it was mythologized, it was idealized how she portrayed it, but you start getting this idea of, "Alright, we are this experiment in Democracy where everybody has got a voice and nobody is better than anybody and nobody is worse than anybody. And when you're living in a country, at the time, Indonesia, you still had scurvy and rickets and polio and you try to explain to your friends over there, "You know, back in the states we take care of those people." And you know there was a sense of superiority.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Total exceptionalism. Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And exceptionalism that got us in all kinds of trouble, but as a kid...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It made you feel as if, "I'm glad I was born under this flag."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: "I'm a part of."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "That I'm a part of." Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, I mean as a child you know, you simply thought you were living in the greatest place on Earth. And ah, first disturbance... I think of that would've been the 'Duck and Cover drills. With the nucle—you know...

[Archive of the United States. Office of Civil Defense Film 'Duck and Cover': sirens fade in...]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, I missed those.

[Archive of the United States. Office of Civil Defense Film 'Duck and Cover': "That signal means to stop whatever you are doing...and get to the nearest safe place fast"... sirens fade out...]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The first sense of dread and paranoia. And I remember being 13 during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963. And people were really scared.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And they should've been because—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The world was going to blow up.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Let me tell you, when you look at the history of how that went down... that was... a close call.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah. Then a little later on, you started having the cultural revolution and... it's funny because I've... as we've been talking about the Space Program, I became a real Space Program buff as I got older.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: But in 1969, I was a 19-year-old kid playing in a bar in Asbury Park the night that they landed on the moon. And we were like..."Fuck the moon landing, man."

BOTH: *[Laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's the man!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's a trick of the man!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's the man!

[Bruce Springsteen's Cover of Boom Boom fades in and plays under]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And we don't want to have anything with it. At nine o' clock we're playing this fucking guitars and that's all there is to it. *[Laughs]* So the place... *[Laughs]* the place had about 50 people in it. 25 wanted to watch the moon landing on television—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

[Archive of Televised Apollo 11 Moon Landing: "That's one small step for man..."]

And 25 wanted the band to play.

[Bruce Springsteen's Cover of Boom Boom plays: "Boom, Boom, Boom! I want to shoot you right down!..."]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And all we did was stand on stage. They had the little black and white TV. The moon landing would start. People would run up to the to the band and go, "Play some damn music, man!" And then we started to play and everybody around, "Shut the... fuck up, boys." *[laughs]*

[Archive of Televised Apollo 11 Moon Landing: "the surface is fine and powdery..."]

And finally, I had a bass player that was a bit of a techie and he said, "You guys are freaking roobs, man. I quit. I'm watching the moon landing." *[laughs]*

[Bruce Springsteen's Cover of Boom Boom plays]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: In the middle of the set?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: In the middle of the set!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And he was right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And he was right!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Come on, man.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I know, he was right. He walked off and that was the end of it, man. *[laughs]* I look back on you know and we were all idiots at the time, but uh it was... it was funny.

[Bruce Springsteen's Cover of Boom Boom fades out]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So how'd— How did you do... There's a little bit of a generational gap for the two of us here because I see the counterculture at the tail end of it. It's already kind of washin' away.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Uh but, the break in... '67 and '68 once you start getting the Vietnam protests and—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The Civil Rights Movement.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The Civil Rights Movement. There's a BIG shift right there. How is that feeling to you?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I think there was a period of... of real disillusionment, you know? Um... I remember, I was a young— '65, 15, '66, 16, I felt like an outsider anyway because of the life that I'd chosen. And I kind of..I played my part in a cultural... eh countercultural community partly because I was young. I wasn't really— I was kind of a faux hippie. I wasn't really a hippie. I always kept one foot in sort of a blue collar world and...and one foot in a countercultural world, and I never truly belonged completely in – in either of them. You know? But, you did get a feeling that the system was fixed and prejudice towards a lot of its citizens.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Now you were of Draft age—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I was.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, w-what happened?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Was there a Draft number or...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, yeah... What happened to me was ah... I, My aunt pulled some strings and got me into a community college.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So, I had one year of being in the community college.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right. So, you got a college deferment.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I met a guy in New York City. Wanted to sign me to a record label deal. 19. Thought I died and went to heaven. I said, he said, "You got to quit school if you're serious about this." I had no problem quitting school whatsoever. Glad to. *[laughs]* "But if I do..."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: "I'm going to be drafted."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: "No worries. I have it completely fixed, you know. It's not a big deal..."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: OK. Go home. I tell my parents, "I'm quitting school. Music is what I want to do with my life." They gave me their blessing even though reluctantly, and I quit school and about few months, two or three months later I got my draft notice in the mailbox. *[laughs]* This would've been 1969.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, so this is just right in the thick of it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, so I said, "I'll get my man on the line in New York." Um, I was never able to get him on the phone again.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Never answered another call of mine.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, did not did not answer.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Not another call. So... believe it or not, me and two other guys from my band get drafted on the exact same day. All three of us.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: In the band?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah. All three of us are going on the bus to Newark. Bright and early we all meet in the parking lot outside of the Asbury Selective Service Office. Everybody is lined up. It's about 80% young Black guys from Asbury Park, maybe 20% white guys who— you know, just young blue collar guys, factory workers, just guys who weren't in college.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The guy... the guys who get drafted.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right. Boom, we're all the bus. We're going up. Some guys have got some tricks up their sleeves. You know, one guy had a big body cast on that he confided into me was not completely authentic.

BOTH: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So... *[laughs]* So, so... I know one thing and one thing only. I'm going to Newark and I'm coming home. Whatever that takes, that's what I'm going to do. For a variety of reasons, 1.) I don't believe in the war and in 1969 not many people did anymore.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Mmm.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: 2.) I'd seen my friends die 3.) I didn't want to die. So... we get there and I pull out every trick I have in the book. I am... I'm signing I'm signing the papers...I'm totally screwing up the papers, as far as they know I am...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Mentally deficient—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: A gay, drug-taking *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You name it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Ah, guitar playing...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Ah brain concussed, which I was. I had been in a terrible motorcycle accident about seven months before and I got a brain concussion. And at the end of the day, you walked down a long hall and it's a long day — particularly if you're pulling a bunch of bullshit, *[laughs]* which is exactly what I was doing.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And at that point, the guys... they they've seen every trick. It's not like you're original—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: No.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: At 19 you're not thinking of anything new that they haven't seen a 100 times.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know... so I'm expecting... you know you go down a long hall. It's an empty hall. There's a guy at a desk. He looks up at you and says, "Sorry Mr. Springsteen, you've been rejected from the Armed Services."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Did you crack a smile or did you look sober and sad?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Very sober and sad. *[laughs]* I said oh.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "Why?"

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And he said, "You can leave this way." So I left. I went out the door and it was me and a bunch of the guys that were on the bus, well I don't know what they did but they got out too. And there was a party on the freaking street in Newark, New Jersey, *[laughs]* with a bunch of guys who were glad that they just got out of the...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: What happened to the other guys in the band?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Everybody got out.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Interesting.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And I got out on the 4-F, which was for ah the brain concussion. You know? The other guys got out on mental deferments for pulling stunts that were *[laughs]* as outrageous or more than what I was pulling. And these were the times, you know? This is... I had no doubt that I was not going to go.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know, the interesting thing for me was... because there was not an active war as I'm entering into being a teenager.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: As a result, um controversies around Vietnam are not formative in my head.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right? I know them as history, but I don't experience them. By the time I became president, I think something very valuable had happened and I think this was a hard learned lesson from Vietnam. The American public had come to recognize and revere the service of our troops even those who were critical of certain aspects of U.S. Military interventions.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And you know, when you hear stories from the Vietnam era, you know as I've listened to you talking about the Draft and Vietnam and you losing friends and... and just the way the country was being torn apart around that war. Um you know, I remember talking to friends who did go and come home and discover that they were called baby killers and spat on and they became somehow the objects of particularly young people's rejection of that war when in fact they were kids who were expressing their patriotism, duty.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Soldiers at the time, I know a lot of the Vets, and they were ignored and and and mistreated for a long time as symbols of quote "The only war America has ever lost."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And that, I think was an important maturing of America.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: In..in in being able to distinguish between policies made by men in suits in Washington versus the professionalism and sacrifice and–

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Courage shown by those who actually fought.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: This was a major thing. This was the first time...

[Synths play under]

In... in my remembered life that I felt the country had lost its way.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Completely lost its way. Through the loss of my friends and my own experience, you know, ah it was... the loss of innocence.

[Guitar picking with synths fade up and then out]

[Credits music comes in]

ANNA HOLMES: Renegades: Born in the U.S.A. is a Spotify Original, presented and produced by Higher Ground Audio in collaboration with Dustlight Productions.

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This is Renegades: Born in the USA.

[Credits music fades out]

– End of Episode –