

Street Fight: When Politics is Black and White

time 00:00:00

CORY BOOKER: I'm Cory Booker, did you ever hear my name?

Cory Booker, I'm not sure if you've heard of me but I'm the City Councilman from the Central Ward but now I'm running for mayor.

BOOKER: Fellas, how y'all doing?

MARSHALL CURRY: Cory Booker is a 32 year old first-term city councilman running for mayor of Newark,

New Jersey's largest city.

BOOKER: I'm coming after you.

CURRY: He's hoping to unseat the long-time incumbent, Sharpe James.

BOOKER: So, I can't believe you used to live in a house where you keep you door open and now you're in a building where you're not even...

WOMAN: I know, I know.

BOOKER: It's outrageous.

WOMAN: (Inaudible) a million locks on your door.

BOOKER: Yeah.

Well, that's our number one issue, and no disrespect to Sharpe James but he's had 16 years to show you what he could do and anything he could've done, he should've done by now.

It's time for some new young blood, OK? Thank you, God bless you. All right, bye-bye.

CURRY: I've been documenting the campaign for a few weeks now, and I'm beginning to get a sense of how many forces there are in this city, working against his candidacy.

JOE FOUSHEE: Excuse me sir, come here, excuse me sir. You can't do it, can't do it. I'm not going to let you walk the hallways.

BOOKER: Joe, this is ridiculous, nothing we're doing here is illegal.

FOUSHEE: You want to leave or you want me to call the cops?

BOOKER: I think you need to call the police. Let's continue, guys.

BOOKER: Hey, how are you, sir? I'm Cory Booker, from the city of Newark, one of your councilmen.

AIDE: There's nothing illegal in what we're doing. Sharpe's people canvassed here a couple of days ago.

FOUSHEE: This is not public building, this is a private...you know.

AIDE: The Housing Authority?

BOOKER: OK, you take care of yourself, bye-bye now.

(muffled talking)

BOOKER: They brought out the big brass (laugh). How you doing?

How you doing?

OFFICER: Let's go, please.

BOOKER: Is this the kind of security they get every night here?

(laughter)

Hey, how are you?

WOMAN: All right.

AIDE: Bringing out the deputy chief, huh?

BOOKER: That's unbelievable.

AIDE: Both cops were downstairs.

BOOKER: It's so ironic, man. Here's a neighborhood that never gets police protection, but I show up and they get the top brass.

CURRY: In Newark, I'm discovering, elections are not about media consultants; they're not about sound bites or photo ops. In Newark, elections are won and lost in the streets.

(phone rings)

WOMAN: Cory Booker for mayor.

CURRY: A few years ago, I'd spent some time teaching in Newark. So I was intrigued when I heard the buzz about the election shaping up between Booker and James.

They're both democrats. Elections in Newark are nonpartisan and people were saying it would be a battle over the future of black leadership in America. But no one was giving Cory much of a chance.

BOOKER: We really -- our focus is grassroots efforts so we try to skimp as much as we can on facilities like this, but what we're basically looking at is where we do all our scheduling, all our fundraising operation comes out of here.

(phone ringing)

HIVER AMBROSE: This is what we live next door to.

They're constantly making black plastic bags.

When we first moved into that office, it looked like this.

AIDE 1: I have to write this thing and it's so loud in here I got to get out of here.

AIDE 2: We're sort of plugging in a surge protector to an outlet to an extension cord to a surge protector to sort of give electricity to the whole place. That's pretty disgusting.

CURRY: There's an old joke in Newark, that the only way an incumbent ever leaves office is death or conviction.

But Cory thinks he's found another way.

BOOKER: I have a philosophy of campaigning, which is I walk every street that I want to represent, all I've been doing in the evenings is walking streets and talking to people like you. I can't even see you without talking to a screen but I'll just let you know, I'm running for mayor and the reason why I'm running; three reasons real quick, OK?

BOOKER VOICEOVER: Newark faces real challenges. We have a murder rate that's twice the Bronx. We have almost a third of our people living below the poverty line. And we graduate only about 40% of our kids from high school. There's no excuse for this, this city could be doing so much better for the people that live here.

CHILD 1: What is you doing?

BOOKER: I'm trying to get people to vote for me; you gonna vote for me?

CHILD: Well, yeah.

I want to vote for you.

BOOKER: You going to vote for me?

CHILD 2: What vote mean?

BOOKER: What does vote mean? It means participating in democracy, trying to make your community better.

WOMAN, IN SPANISH: De donde eres (Where are you from)?

BOOKER, IN SPANISH: De donde (Where)?

TRANSLATOR: El es americano (He's American).

WOMAN, IN SPANISH: Americano?

BOOKER, IN SPANISH: Adivina, adivina (Guess, guess).

WOMAN, IN SPANISH: Americano?

BOOKER: Si! Un Americano guapo, o no (A handsome American, or no)?

WOMAN, IN SPANISH: Me calles bien, suerte (I wish you well).

BOOKER: Gracias.

BOOKER: Did I tell you my ancestors come from a small island in the south of Spain?

AIDE: Oh really?

BOOKER: Yeah.

It's called Africa.

AIDE: (laughs) Small island.

BOOKER: Little rain's not going to stop us, is it?

AIDE: Oh no.

BOOKER: How you doing?

What are you doing out this late?

GIRL: She just plays down here, you know.

BOOKER: It's almost ten o'clock.

CURRY: Cory lives in Brick Towers, a low income housing project in one of Newark's poorest wards. It's the ward he represents in the city council. But he grew up 25 miles and a world away in suburban Herrington Park, New Jersey.

BOOKER VOICEOVER: Our parents were very active in the civil rights movement and we integrated an all-white neighborhood after a big court fight against a real-estate agent who wouldn't show us any houses there. I was a high school all-American football player, got a scholarship to play football at Stanford University. Where things really took off for me. Of course at the end of my law school career I moved to Newark to set up a nonprofit going after slumlords.

But I got pulled into politics and decided to run for city council, and amazingly, won.

After I got elected I moved into Brick Towers because I wanted to stay close to the community that elected me. And every morning when I woke up and when I came home at night I wanted to be reminded of the reasons why I got into office in the first place.

MAN: How you doing, Mr Booker?

BOOKER: Doing very well, you all right?

MAN: Yes sir. I'm gonna vote for you.

BOOKER: Thank you very much.

MAN: Definitely.

BOOKER: Spread the word, all right?

MAN: Yes sir.

BOOKER: Hi, I don't want to interrupt your work.

WOMAN: My hands are wet.

BOOKER: That's OK, I'll take a wet hand (laughs).

BOOKER: It's Cory, Cory Booker.

WOMAN: I met you before.

BOOKER: Oh, OK.

MAN 1: I like you, but I ain't voting for you.

MAN 2: I hope you make a change, whoever get in there.

BOOKER: Well, if you keep putting the same people in there, you're not going to see a change. You're going to get the same results.

MAN 1: Yeah, but we been hearing that for so long.

BOOKER: How old are, how old are you, brother?

MAN 1: I'm 41 years old.

BOOKER: OK, for the last 32 years of your life, you've had the same leadership.

Sharpe James has been in City Hall since 1970. We don't make change, we let people get down there and create dynasties. We have the highest paid city government in the country. Your city council people make over a hundred G's a year when they put in all their perks. Sharpe James got into office, he was making \$70,000 a year in 1986. He's raised his salary, now the brother's making over \$200,000 a year and he wasn't satisfied.

MAN 2: That's what Sharpe James is making?

BOOKER: Yeah.

Then he went over and got another job, he's got two jobs now, we got brothers looking for one, he's the mayor and a state senator, makes about a quarter of a million dollars a year. So let's be for real right now, if every politician was on the streets, OK, out there really fighting to make real solutions, OK, and living in -- make every politician live in the worst neighborhood in their city. I guarantee the city would turn around a lot quicker.

CURRY: Today, Sharpe James is formally throwing his hat into the ring.

SHARPE JAMES: This campaign, from the beginning to the end, as always, is a positive campaign.

CURRY: I introduced myself to the campaign's press person.

I tell him I'd love to spend some time following the mayor's campaign, and he seems

receptive. I've never heard Sharpe James speak before, but once he takes the stage, it becomes obvious why he's never lost an election.

JIM MCGREEVEY: Thank you. Sharpe James is the real deal! Sharpe James is the real deal! Ladies and Gentlemen, the mayor and the next mayor of the great city of Newark, Sharpe James!

(cheering)

SHARPE JAMES: Today it is my wish to continue to give something back to the city of Newark that took a poor boy living on Howard Street and South Forage Avenue in one room with a pot bellied stove, with an outhouse in the back yard, one pair of sneakers, one pair of pants, one t-shirt, and today the poor boy from Howard Street is your mayor and seeking re-election. Let the work I've done speak for me; I don't feel no ways tired. Today, I officially declare myself a candidate for re-election for mayor of the city of Newark, New Jersey.

(applause, cheering)

CURRY: As I film the crowd, the mayor notices me and says something to his security detail. Suddenly, I'm surrounded by four plainclothes policemen.

POLICEMAN 1: You had to be authorized to come in here.

CURRY: I was authorized.

POLICEMAN 2: I want to know who you spoke to if I'm not going to lock you up.

CURRY: That's fine.

POLICEMAN 1: I'm being for real with you.

That's why I'm asking you to take the tape out.

CURRY: Alright.

I'm not going to take the tape out.

POLICEMAN 1: Open it, open it up.

CURRY: No, I'm not going to take the tape out.

POLICEMAN 1: You're not?

CURRY: No, I'm not going to do that.

POLICEMAN 1: You want to hang out with me?

CURRY: No, I don't want to do that either.

POLICEMAN 1: Do you have identification on you?

CURRY: Are you a police officer?

POLICEMAN 1: I sure am.

CURRY: OK, well, we'll talk about it when we get outside.

POLICEMAN 1: Huh?

CURRY: We can talk about it when we get outside.

POLICEMAN 1: (laughs) Follow me.

Where's your car parked?

CURRY: I don't see what the problem is.

POLICEMAN 2: I don't see what the question is.

Mayor said can you just escort him out and that's the -- ain't question about it.

POLICEMAN 1: You hanging with Cory, huh?

CURRY: I've been shooting Cory, it's an election, and I'm trying to cover the election.

POLICEMAN 1: He's not our guy.

I was going to confiscate his film.

POLICEMAN 2: I need to see identification.

CURRY: OK, can I see some identification from you?

You're a police officer?

POLICEMAN 2: I sure am.

CURRY: And so you need to see identification from me because why?

POLICEWOMAN: We are police officers and we want to see some identification, that's all we want to see.

CURRY: OK, and you're sure that you can just ask people on the street for identification?

POLICEMAN 2: We sure can.

CURRY: OK.

CURRY VOICEOVER: They write down my home address and license plate number. I'm baffled. I call the mayor's press person and explain again what I'm doing. He apologizes and says he'll talk to the mayor. But my follow-up phone calls and faxes go unanswered, and I soon discover that I'm not the only one having trouble for spending too much time with Cory Booker.

JIMMY MITCHELL: I opened this place up in '97.

I never had any problems until Cory Booker came to my house one night.

He wanted the people in the community to get to know him that didn't know him. So, I suggested I have like a coffee klatch at my house, and invite 15 or 20 people over. So I had one, one Sunday night. And like I said, that Monday, the police came, said I wasn't legal, and they closed my business down.

PABLO FONSECA: You can go to any place in this city and you can find the violation.

CURRY: Pablo Fonseca used to be the head of code enforcement for the city of Newark.

PABLO FONSECA: If you're in this city, you have to be very careful, you know, if you take on Sharpe James. You know, everything is at his power. Is at his behest. He can make your life impossible. (in Spanish) Cuatro, uh, en la ciudad de Newark, tenemos cuatro mil quinientos... (Four, in the city of Newark we have four million five hundred...)

CURRY: He was also Sharpe James's campaign manager in the Latino community.

FONSECA: Two years ago, I supported a candidate Sharpe James did not like and did not back. And even though I was protected by civil service, he brought me up on charges and demoted me. From supervising a four million dollar budget to supervising to two people in a sanitation garage, that's a reality check on uh, on politics.

That's Politics 101. And it was, you know, wow. What the hell? I sued the administration, and won. And I joined the Booker team.

CURRY: Jimmy Mitchell joined the Booker campaign too. As Cory's driver. But for most people, their businesses come first.

BOOKER: They sent code enforcement down to Bergen Street to basically threaten folks. And just say, if you put up a Cory Booker sign you'll face the consequences. And having code enforcement deliver that message, you know, is pretty persuasive.

CURRY: Over the next few weeks, I meet a policeman whose support for Booker got him transferred to night patrol in a dangerous neighborhood. A minister whose church was threatened by code enforcement after he criticized the mayor. A woman who fears she'll lose her public housing if she hangs a Booker sign in her window.

SPENCER HOLDEN: People have children, people have houses and mortgages and rent to pay and food to buy. Why are you firing somebody? Because they don't want to vote for you. That's their God-given right. That's their -- you're born in America, you have the right to vote for who you want to. That's what it's all about and when you take that from somebody and the law doesn't stand up for it and do something about it, there's something seriously wrong.

FONSECA: Just on this schedule, like tonight's fundraiser, it shouldn't have Jimmy Wright's name on it because if somebody picks this up, guy, Jimmy Wright's ass is going to be at cell block 24 hours a day. These are like people who are putting a lot on the line for us, that if Sharpe has any idea, you know, he will crush these people.