



AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Jeh Johnson

This is my great-great grandmother, Julia Branch. She was born and lived her entire life in, um, Southwest Virginia. She was born in 1848 as an enslaved person. She was a teenager during the Civil War, when presumably she continued as an enslaved person. After she was emancipated, she, uh, continued to work for a white family for her entire life. Uh, and, interestingly, when she died in 1937, she was buried in an integrated cemetery in Lynchburg, Virginia; the old city cemetery. Uh, she had no headstone. Uh, her family put a headstone at the cemetery in the vicinity of where we think she's buried, but the headstone is just a few feet away from, uh, the headstones of confederate soldiers, uh, which is -- you know, sometimes history is complicated. Uh, I'm also -- as you mentioned -- a graduate of Morehouse College. Uh, over my right shoulder, in addition to that Senate tally, is a black-and-white photograph of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President emeritus of Morehouse College, who was the guiding light for every more house man. Morehouse is the only all-male black college in the country. But, Dr. Mays was the guiding light for every Morehouse man who graduated from the '40s to the 1970s. That includes a time span that, uh, that encompasses both me and Martin Luther King Jr. Uh, I went to school with Martin Luther King III. And, so, I think I have an acute sense of, uh, the African American experience. I'm a proud and patriotic American, and much of my family history is the story of, of this country. I, up until 2008, did not believe that we would have a black President in my lifetime. Uh, if you had said to me 40 years ago, or even 30, or 20 years ago we'd have a black President in my lifetime, let alone that I would be in his Cabinet, it would have been incomprehensible. On election night 2008, I think many of us, white and black, believed that was a major step forward toward a more perfect union. And it was. However, in the life of one eight-year administration, uh, we were not going to eradicate racism in the heart of every American or in the heart of every police officer across every police department in this country. And so, when I look at the events of Minneapolis, and now Atlanta, I see two things: one, it's not simply a matter of training. I think when you look at, uh, the officer snuffing out the life of George Floyd by putting his, his knee on his neck, you see an individual who is so



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depraved, there's no level of training that could teach somebody don't do that. I think it means we have to look at the very character of the type of people we're recruiting to our nation's police forces. Are we recruiting people who want to serve and protect the public? Or are we recruiting people who want to be the neighborhood bully or the neighborhood badass with a racist heart? When we look at the events of Atlanta, which are similar to so many other events, uh, like Staten Island, Eric Garner, I do believe that as a matter of training we should continually emphasize tactics in de-escalation. Every once in a while, a police officer will find him or herself in a situation where tensions are escalating, the adrenaline that goes up, and the police officer in that circumstance needs to remember, I am the superior actor here. I'm the person with the gun. Maybe I need to take a step back and say to myself, I got involved in this because this guy was asleep, uh, behind the wheel at a drive-in at a Wendy's. Or I got involved in this because of a \$20 counter- uh, counterfeit bill. Or I got involved in this because of a package of cigarettes being sold on the street in Staten Island. Maybe I need to take a step back here. Is it really worth it? Is a chokehold really worth it in this circumstance? And just say to everyone else around, "Let's all calm down, let's take a deep breath," and then, perhaps, you know, bring the person home or whatever. But the tactic of de-escalation, because I me-, what was so plain about Atlanta was it started off one way and it escalated into something that the officers could not have intended, but because they didn't keep their heads, um, are now faced with a murder charge. And so, uh, I think that that is something that police forces across this country, who are there to serve and protect, uh, need to rededicate themselves to.