**Headline:** What Kevin Alexander Gray Taught Me

**Teaser:** The late civil rights activist and author didn’t let elected officials off the hook, no matter how liberal. He understood the importance of intersectionality and what it takes to achieve progressive change.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

In July 2015, when two Black Lives Matter activists challenged liberal candidates running for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, the late Kevin Alexander Gray told me in an [interview](https://youtu.be/0vclasUiftk), “all candidates ought to have an agenda that deals with the issues that the Black community are grappling with right now, to include police violence, to include economics, to include all the issues that the Black Lives Matter activists raised.”

Gray didn’t let anyone off the hook, including Vermont’s independent Senator Bernie Sanders, who had launched his first presidential campaign, and was considered the most left-leaning candidate. “They ought to hire Black people to advise them in their campaigns,” he said, “instead of just organizing a group of white men, which Bernie Sanders is guilty of doing too, and letting those people try to filter what it is that the candidates get.”

Gray was a longtime civil rights activist and the author of multiple books, including *The Decline of Black Politics: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama* (2008), *Waiting for Lightning to Strike: The Fundamentals of Black Politics* (2008), and *Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence* (2014). He [passed away](https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/03/08/kevin-alexander-gray-a-mighty-heart-has-stopped-but-it-didnt-fail/) on March 7, 2023, of a heart attack.

During the 2015 interview, Gray echoed what [many Black thinkers](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/14/bernie-sanders-must-take-race-seriously-black-lives-matter) of the time were demanding of Sanders: give racial justice as much weight as economic justice because the two are so intimately linked, and failing to do so means accepting a racist status quo.

It was typical of Gray to forcefully make such connections, to have an intersectional lens, and to choose his values and ideals over what pundits deemed was the practical thing to do. It’s why I interviewed him many times over my journalism career, and it’s what I’ll miss most about him.

About a decade later, the idea of “[racial capitalism](https://www.kundnani.org/what-is-racial-capitalism/)” began to be taken more seriously. But it was the analysis of Black thinkers like Gray, who had the benefit of a long arc of political activism, that pushed the idea forward, and that uplifted the economic justice demands of younger Black activists like those leading the Black Lives Matter movement. Today, Senator Sanders routinely calls out [structural racism](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-disproportionate-impact-coronavirus-black-america_n_5e8d337bc5b6e1a2e0fba4de). He and other white liberal leaders had to be pushed into doing so.

Gray, who was [campaign manager in South Carolina](https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/frank-watkins-obituary/) for Jesse Jackson’s 1988 presidential run, had also been critical of the nation’s first Black president, Barack Obama. The first time [I spoke with Gray](https://bit.ly/3Yxvj6E) was in July 2010 when the Obama administration fired an African American official named [Shirley Sherrod](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128699931) from her position at the Department of Agriculture because of a right-wing effort to misrepresent a speech she made.

As usual, Gray didn’t mince words. He said to me, “I’m a Black man in America. This country is eaten up with racism and white supremacy—which is the other term no one ever seems to want to use.” It would be at least six years before the phrase “white supremacy” finally became commonly used to explain the rise of Donald Trump’s white nationalist leadership.

But in 2010, Gray decried what he said was being dubbed, “post-racialism,” and “the sanitization of American history while Barack Obama is president.”

His analysis was direct but also nuanced. “We should defend him [Barack Obama] when the attack is about him being Black and being Black as a disqualifier for being president or anything because that is structural racism and white supremacy, because that is an attack against us.”

Gray was not swayed by grand rhetoric. When Obama won reelection in 2012, analysts and pundits regaled [his 2013 inauguration speech](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/01/21/second-inauguration-barack-obama) as unleashed from the constraints of campaigning. The New York Times called it “[evolved and unapologetic](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/22/us/politics/obamas-speech-is-urgent-call-for-progressive-values.html).” But when I [turned to Gray](https://bit.ly/41ZUWjo) for analysis, he said, “I hear pundits and everyone lauding it as a progressive manifesto, but it’s far from that.”

“You’ve got the prison industrial complex being fed by poor people, poor Black kids… What the Black community needs and what poor people need are jobs programs,” said Gray. “And those programs are not going to be forthcoming from this administration or this Congress just because they are talking about cutting.”

In response to Obama uplifting sacrosanct government programs like Social Security and Medicare in his speech, Gray pointed out that the [Bowles-Simpson commission](https://www.cbpp.org/research/bowles-simpson-social-security-proposal-not-a-good-starting-point-for-reforms)—convened in 2010 by none other than Obama—had recommended cuts to such programs and recommended raising the eligibility age for Social Security to 67. Gray said, “I’m a 55-year-old Black man. The average lifespan of a Black man is [67](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3393007/). So why would you start there?”

(In fact, Gray was 65 when he died—a fact that hit me hard as I listened to his archival interview.)

Gray asked about Obama’s second term, “Is he going to affirmatively defend FDR’s New Deal and Social Security, and a pension for people when they get old, or is he going to give it all up to the Republicans? That’s the basic legislative and policy question before we cheer and celebrate a line in a speech!” In the end, Gray was right to question the president’s motives. By 2016 it became clear that Obama’s two-term legacy was less about progressive transformation and more about “the benefits of practicality and compromise,” as one analyst pointed out in the [Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/30/barack-obama-bernie-sanders-progressive-liberal-policy).

Gray understood that change didn’t happen solely by electing Black people or even progressives of any race to positions of power. “People need to organize—poor people, working people—to put pressure on the government, at the local level and the congressional level,” he said in 2013.

He pointed out that Obama had become more progressive on LGBTQ rights, for example, not because the president realized that equality was important on his own, but because he had been forced to evolve. Obama has “come a long way,” said Gray. “And of course, the reason he’s come so far on gay rights is because the gay community has worked its agenda—it’s filed lawsuits, it’s filed referendums, and it’s moved the issue forward to where it is mainstream and it’s… politically smart to be an advocate for equal rights.”

Such powerful and elegant analyses were typical of Gray. He saw clearly the connections between grassroots pressure and politicians’ PR moves.

“Movements are connected to something long term,” [said Gray](https://bit.ly/3JaVbzk) to me once. “We have to rebuild organizations, we have to rebuild networks… It’s got to be led by young people, but it’s got to include all people. It’s got to be multiracial, it’s got to be multi-issue. And that’s when movements take place, and that’s when change takes place.”

As usual, he was right.