

INTERVIEW WITH ADVOCACY AND POLICY STRATEGIST NA'ILAH AMARU

BY JULENE ALLEN

Back in 2016, Na'ilah Amaru was chosen for what would appear to be one of the most important responsibilities in a presidential election. She was selected to formally nominate Hillary Clinton for president of the United States on behalf of the Democratic party.

Before delivering her nomination speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention and declaring her support for Clinton to a national stage, the New York delegate had been working as a policy strategist in Atlanta, Georgia after serving in the United States military. Amaru received distinguished honors for her service. She was the lowest ranking soldier and only woman to receive her battalion's Soldier of the Month recognition and was awarded an Army Commendation medal for exemplary service. In our interview, Amaru discusses life, liberty and pursuits and coping after a significant loss.

How did the transition from being in the military transpire into your work in community activism and public policy?

Serving my country in the United States Army was an honor. I learned lessons about life and leadership that I carry with me to this day. I learned the importance of discipline and accountability and deepened my understanding of teamwork and integrity. To be clear, as a woman, as a woman of color, and as an enlisted soldier, I also learned about the structures of power - and that I didn't have any. That lived experience of not having a voice or any power served as a critical foundation for my career and provided a clear direction for my life. When I left active duty, my new mission was to create spaces where traditionally marginalized communities could re-define their power and become part of the decision-making processes on issues that impacted their lives. It is through the transformation of the concept of power—and its application, that neglected communities can protect and build political, social, and economic power in a system designed to create inequities. Public policy was my chosen path because it impacts society in both scale and scope. There are opportunities to create social change no matter where on the spectrum of policy one wants to work. Whether it is one issue you care deeply about or a variety of issues, be it on the national level or your local neighborhood, there are always more ways to make life better and there is

always more work to do. I knew that a formal education was a way to build my arsenal of knowledge and would help me fulfill my new mission when I left the service. When I was active duty, I attended school full-time at night, four days a week, on weekends, and all year round. I used my GI Bill to earn graduate degrees in the field of public administration, public policy, and urban planning.

What was the most valuable lesson for you after serving as a woman in the military?

People will underestimate you, discount you, and make snap judgments about you—all without knowing you. I have learned that whatever their reasons are, it doesn't concern me. My work and success always speak for itself.

You have served as a policy advisor to Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, legislative aide to U.S. Congressman John Lewis, and as executive director of the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus of the New York City Council. Which area do you feel you've made the most impact and why?

I have learned from each of my positions and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve different communities in Atlanta and New York. The concept of “impact” is relative because it can be viewed through the lens of both scale and scope – both of which are critical in the political and policy landscape. When I worked with Kasim Reed, I focused on issues from a citywide perspective. When I worked for Congressman John Lewis, I focused on issues specific to Georgia's 5th congressional district. When I worked for the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus, I focused on issues relevant to all twenty-six districts of the caucus members. In each of these positions, I was able to make an impact, but it looked different in terms of scale and scope.

You were a speaker at the last Democratic National Convention. You had the opportunity to tell your personal story on a national or even global stage. What was this experience like?

The experience was the honor of a lifetime. I received a phone call notifying me that I was selected to serve as one of three presidential nominators. While I was still processing the moment, the DNC staff and I dived directly into logistics - lodging, transportation, and my own personal speaker tracker—all the different elements that make the DNC come to life. I was on autopilot through the entire process—I felt the magnitude



As a political strategist, Na'ilah Amaru discusses how she's putting the pieces back together and rebuilding after Hillary's presidential loss in 2016.

of the moment after I delivered my speech. I was interviewed off to the side of the stage and was asked, "What were you thinking during your speech?" I responded, "In my speech, I referenced my eleven-year self, but my eleven-year-old self never dreamed THIS." In that moment, I turned around, gestured behind me with a sweeping motion, and lost my breath. It

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was the first time I saw the crowd, and that was the moment I was moved to tears. When I delivered my speech, I wasn't focused on the crowd—I was focused on my mission and that was to tell my story. Seeing the crowd from the side of the stage deeply moved me. Diverse, beautiful, and rowdy, it was a reflection of who we are—everyone in America was somewhere in that crowd. The Democratic Party works to create policies and programs that provide solutions and make America a better place for everyone. To be a part of history by submitting Hillary Clinton's name into presidential nomination



was surreal and the honor of a lifetime. Another important aspect of my DNC experience was the emotional process of sharing my story which I had always kept private. I was touched by how many people approached me afterward or sent me personal messages through social media, sharing how they connected with some part of my journey. Whether it was the lived experience of having two moms, being a veteran, being a woman of color, or being an immigrant, many chapters of my story are uniquely American and shared with countless others. It was a lesson for me in the power of vulnerability—how we can share who we are and connect with each other through our stories. Where else in the world can a child begin life in an orphanage and have the opportunity to share her life's journey on a national stage? Only in America.

After losing the election for what many thought would be the first woman president of the United States, what is a key takeaway from this experience?

Around 7 PM on Election Night, I was interviewed at the Javits Center and was asked what I would do if Hillary Clinton lost. I remember telling the reporter, "a lesson I learned from her 2008 campaign loss—as heartbreaking as that was—you pick up the pieces and you get back to work." Back in 2008, I was devastated when she made the decision to suspend her presidential campaign. Her loss was so deeply personal. I hoped she would run again in 2016, and when she went through that process and became the nominee, people thought "Finally, a woman president might really happen! After 240 years, democracy is about to include women! We the people is about to include us." When Hillary lost, I was angry, scared, and heartbroken, but you pick up the pieces and you get back to work – and that process looks different for everybody. After the 2016 election, I knew people who couldn't get out of bed for days. I knew people (including myself), who had organizing

meetings the same week because our lives were on the line and we had no time to waste. The key takeaway of 2016 was grounded in the same truth as 2008: In life, we will hit low points, but we do what we have to do to keep moving forward. A key step in the process of moving forward is taking the time to pick up the pieces. Then, you rebuild. There is a tremendous amount of personal agency and power in this process, and I have learned, that what we rebuild is often stronger than what was broken.

What sort of advice would you lend to yourself at the start of your career?

Believe in yourself. I explained to a mentee that I spent a great deal of my career hiding behind my credentials and experiences. As a woman of color navigating white male-dominated spaces, from the military to the political sphere, unless people knew my resume, there was always a question of my qualifications. Every time I stepped into a room, I had to validate why I was there. I wish I had someone tell me that I was enough. That I didn't need multiple advanced degrees to prove that I was competent or that I didn't need experience ranging from the grassroots to Capitol Hill to prove that I deserved to occupy political spaces. I made those decisions because I knew my accomplishments and credentials had to be on point to be taken seriously. For those at the beginning of your career, believe in yourself. For women of color, every day we navigate a society that tells us we are not enough. In those moments of uncertainty and self-doubt, know that your skills and expertise have prepared you to succeed. Also, understand your worth is not rooted in any job title or salary, but rather in recognizing your own value without condition. Regard-

less of degrees, certificates, or awards, know that you are enough.

You will soon be navigating in the world of urban planning. Can you give us a peek into what sort of social change you'd like to make in this new leadership role?

The concept of "community development" is the thread that connects all my work in the nonprofit and government sectors. Up until this point in my career, I've approached community development through the policy lens by focusing on social justice and economic issues. For example, "what policies will produce more equity in education, health-care, and criminal justice reform?" Urban planning is the next step in the evolution of my career because it expands my understanding of what community development means, and how I can work in a familiar space but in a different way. Urban planning is more than a profession or a field. It creates the political, social, and economic geography of cities. It determines where affordable housing is built versus luxury housing, or where schools or grocery markets are located— all of which impact our communities and tight-knit social networks. That's important because the physical built environment has a significant impact on our everyday lives. To that end, I was intentional about building my arsenal of knowledge by learning the language and technical aspects of urban planning, and examining what community development looked like through a different lens other than public policy. I don't know what's next for me. I do know, whatever it is, it will align with the work I've always done which is using policy and politics as a tool to build communities. I look forward to using my skills and expertise to create spaces at the intersections of planning, politics, people, and policy, and centering the needs of marginalized communities throughout New York City. ♀