



Stewart Lawrence

Why did top Democrats try to kill a pro-Obama documentary?

In Opinion

Posted By Stewart Lawrence

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It was Hawaiian-born film maker Gloria Borland's worst nightmare. After struggling for nearly six years to complete her first feature-length documentary, "Barack Obama: Made in Hawaii," Borland was feeling hopeful again. The *Washington Post* had just featured her in a flattering profile. The piece noted that her two-hour film, based largely on extensive interviews with Obama's childhood associates, as well as archival footage, was in post-production, and that Borland still needed funding. And she was starting to get calls.

But one of those calls, from Michele Griffin, a major Democratic Party donor in Virginia, put a damper on Borland's enthusiasm. Griffin wasn't calling to donate, but to make a guilt-ridden confession. "They told us not to fund you, Gloria. The DNC [Democratic National Committee]. They didn't want to see the film aired. That's why I never helped you last year," she said.

Borland was flabbergasted. She'd seen hints of possible trouble previously but had never connected the dots. In 2011, a well-connected Washington lawyer was ecstatic after viewing one of Borland's early video reels, and eagerly pledged his support. So did a former Democratic congressman from California, Mel Levine. But they soon stopped taking her phone calls or even answering her emails. At the time, she merely found it odd.

But after Griffin's call, suddenly it all made sense.



"It's pretty clear that the word went out from the DNC to stay away from 'Barack Obama: Made in Hawaii,'" Borland says. "Most people first check with the DNC before contributing to a project like this, and very few top Democratic supporters I contacted ever followed through."

Griffin, in fact, had never asked the DNC's permission before deciding to push ahead with fundraising on Borland's behalf. She shared Borland's love of Hawaii and her fondness for Obama. And she thought Borland's project held enormous political potential.

But a top DNC official — one that Griffin still refuses to name — didn't think so. He called Griffin at her home and all but ordered her to stop raising money for "Barack Obama: Made in Hawaii." "He was incredibly rude about it, too," she recalls.

When I first heard about Borland's film, I was somewhat skeptical myself. Obama had not lived most of his life in Hawaii, after all. He spent much of his early childhood in Indonesia. Those were parts of his biography that had drawn the most attention of conservatives who wanted to portray the 44th president as something other than a "true blue" American. So I understood Borland's desire to set the record straight about Obama's birthplace — the film really closes the door on this issue — and to fill in such a critical part of the president's biography.

But it wasn't until I started reviewing raw footage from the dozens of taped interviews she'd conducted with Obama's childhood friends and classmates, his sister, as well as his teachers and the current Hawaii

governor Neil Abercrombie, who knew Obama and his parents when he was still a child, that the full weight and importance of her film hit me.

Even in post-production, "Barack Obama: Made in Hawaii" is an impressive documentary. No one in the print or broadcast media has collected this much material on the early background of the president, and for historical reasons alone, it should be completed and given a wide airing.

But, in fact, what's most impressive about the film may be its central argument: according to Borland, Obama has brought to his presidency a personality, a political style and a set of policy ideas that were forged in his native Hawaii. Forget about Obama the Harvard lawyer, or the Chicago community organizer. "It's just like Michelle Obama says. If you really want to understand Barack, you have to understand Hawaii," Borland says.

How does Borland show this? In part, through her fascinating interviews, which place Obama's development in the context of Hawaii's unique multiculturalism where angry racism and militancy of the kind one often finds in mainland cities is unheard of. Most people in Hawaii are of mixed ancestry, and they grow up and play together from their earliest years. Obama certainly did, as soon becomes clear from the rainbow of faces that relate stories of what it was like to know nation's first black president as a teenager.

"He was a regular kid, but he had something special about him from the very beginning," says one former classmate. "To see him rise to such heights has been amazing, but it's not something I would say, wow, I never thought this was possible."

The film is also impressive for the way it traces many of Obama's best known policy stances to initiatives that Hawaii was the first in the nation to undertake everything from universal healthcare to support for gay marriage to the production of electric cars. Viewers may be surprised to learn that Hawaii transitioned from analog to digital technology a full decade before the mainland, and that a fourth of new homes in Hawaii are powered entirely by solar energy.

Many of Obama's classmates were also children of soldiers either stationed in Hawaii or in Vietnam fighting. Obama was familiar with military thinking and military life from an early age, Borland insists. He also knew first hand the devastating consequences of war in distant lands. "That's one of the reasons he was able to deal so well with the generals in Afghanistan," she says.

Why would the DNC oppose such a compelling perspective on Obama's political life? David Jacobsohn, an officer of the Bank of Hawaii, managed to sit down with three well-connected Democratic party lawyers who told him that Hawaii was "too exotic" in the minds of most voters, not "heartland" enough. Moreover, by focusing on Obama's birthplace, the film might draw unwanted attention to the "birther" issue.

"Nonsense," Borland says. "Those lawyers never even saw the trailer, let alone most of the footage," she insists. "It all comes down to political control. The people around Obama – his Chicago team, especially – insist on managing his image, regardless of what the record actually shows."

Borland points to videos of Obama that the DNC produced during the 2008 and 2012 conventions. Neither mentioned Hawaii, even though a number of the early shots of Obama in his youth were actually taken there. "It's like they're trying to airbrush a part of his history – and our history away," she says.

"Other prospective donors are coming forward to say they couldn't get the DNC's sign-off on the film. They still don't want to write the checks because they fear retribution," she adds. "A lot of these people are currying favor with the White House and they're afraid of getting shut out if they don't toe the party line."

President Obama himself knows about her film, Borland says. Last October, a month before the 2012 election, Jack McAdoo, an old Obama chum who appears on camera in the film, had a private audience with the president after a political event in Tampa. McAdoo handed Obama a preliminary DVD version of Borland's film. The president promised to take a look.

Borland doubts that Obama actually knew about the DNC's campaign to stop her film. She suspects that a top White House aide – senior adviser David Axelrod, perhaps — or former Virginia governor (now U.S. Senator) Tim Kaine, an Obama loyalist who headed the DNC from 2008 through 2011, might have put pressure on prospective donors like Griffin to stop. Kaine's office could not be reached for comment.

Opposition from the DNC has certainly cost Borland financially. She's made 15 trips to eight states to track down and interview key sources. And without major donor funding, she's spent \$400,000 of her own money, which has drained her deceased parents' small estate. But she says she's not angry, just more determined than ever to complete the

film. At this point, with so much invested, it's become a pure labor of love.

"The DNC didn't have to support me, if it didn't want to," Borland says matter-of-factly. "But it's disturbing that people so close to the president don't seem to appreciate the role of a free and independent media. You know, I voted for Obama. I'm not the enemy."

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