

On Board: Behind the Scenes with The President and The First Lady at Gorée Island

[AIRCRAFT NOISE]

[MUSIC]

MRS. OBAMA: Today, we boarded a ferry to Gorée Island, which is just off the coast of Senegal.

Now, for roughly 300 years, until the mid 1840s, millions of men, women, and children from Africa were kidnapped from their homes and communities and brought to this island to be sold as slaves.

Now, on the island, we saw cells where dozens of people were packed together for months on end. We saw the courtyard where they were forced to stand naked while buyers examined them, negotiated a price, and bought them as if they were nothing but property. And we saw what is known as the door of no return, the doorway through which these men and women and children passed on their way across the ocean to a life of slavery, a brutal journey many of us know as the Middle Passage.

Standing there, I thought about the terror and grief these people must have felt as they took their last steps through that doorway, knowing they would never again see their families or their country.

There is no way to undo what happened on Gorée Island, and no way to erase the stain of slavery from our nation's past, but there is also no denying the course that history has taken since that time. Since then, we've seen so many brave men and women rise up against slavery and segregation and injustice and inequality of all kinds.

People who came through this island could never have imagined how history would unfold, and they certainly could never have imagined that someone like me, a descendent of slaves, would come here, and look back through that door of no return.

Maybe in the end, that is an argument for hope even in the face of the most unspeakable horrors, because time and again, both in America and around the world, we have seen that cruelty and oppression are no match for people of conscience who commit themselves to the cause of freedom.