

This Day in History... September 29, 1955

Birth of Gwen Ifill

Gwendolyn L. Ifill was born on September 29, 1955, in Jamaica, Queens. The first African American woman to host a national political show and moderate a vice presidential debate, she was widely known and respected for her integrity and ability to remain unbiased.

Ifill was the fifth child of an African Methodist Episcopal minister, whose job required the family to move frequently. She spent her childhood in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York. Ifill graduated high school in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1973 and went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts in communications from Simmons College in Boston.

While still a student at Simmons, Ifill interned for the *Boston Herald-American* and began cultivating her passion for journalism. She worked for the paper after graduating and then went on to work at the *Baltimore Evening Sun* from 1981 to 1984, *The Washington Post* from 1984 to 1991, and *The New York Times* from 1991 to 1994.

Ifill started her first television job in 1994, serving as NBC's Capitol Hill reporter. Five years later, she became the first black woman to host a national political talk show, PBS's *Washington Week in Review*. From there, Ifill quickly became one of the most trusted names in journalism, appearing on *PBS NewsHour*, *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, *Charlie Rose*, *Inside Washington*, and *The Tavis Smiley Show*. She also co-hosted *Jamestown Live!* – a special webcast celebrating the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, Virginia.

In addition to her work on-camera, Ifill served on the boards of the Harvard Institute of Politics, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Museum of Television and Radio, and the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism. In 2017, the Burton Benjamin Memorial Award given by the Committee to Protect Journalists was renamed the Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award.

In 2004, Ifill was the first African American woman to moderate a vice-presidential debate (between Dick Cheney and John Edwards). Four years later, she again moderated the vice presidential debate (between Joe Biden and Sarah Palin). Initially, some questioned if she would be objective because she had a book planned to release the following year titled *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*. Ifill responded "I've got a pretty long track record covering politics and news, so I'm not particularly worried that one-day blog chatter is going to destroy my reputation. The proof is in the pudding. They can watch the debate tomorrow night and make their own decisions about whether or not I've done my job."

In the end, Ifill received positive reviews for treating the candidates equally. Her book, released in 2009, covered the stories of several African American politicians and her publisher said the book showed "why this is a pivotal moment in American history." It went on to be a best-seller. Ifill became co-anchor and co-managing editor of *NewsHour* alongside Judy Woodruff in 2013. In 2016, they became the first team of women to moderate a Democratic presidential debate.

Ifill received many awards during her career, including the Women in Film and Video Women of Vision Award, a Peabody Award, the First Amendment Award, the Goldsmith Career Award for Excellence in Journalism, and several others. She also received more than 20 honorary doctorates and was inducted into the Journalism Hall of Fame and the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame. Diagnosed with breast and endometrial cancer, Ifill died on November 14, 2016. After her death, her former school, Simmons College, announced it would launch the Gwen Ifill College of Media, Arts and Humanities. New York City also named a park in Queens after her.



Gwen Ifill was the 43rd honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



Gwen Ifill's first TV job was as a Capitol Hill reporter.



Ifill hosted a special webcast celebrating the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, America's first permanent English settlement.



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