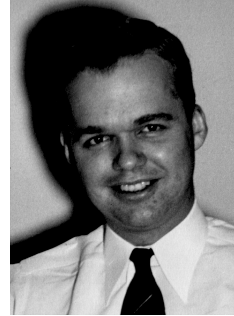
# HOWARD W. JOHNSON



b. 1922, BA 1943 Central College (Chicago), MA 1947 University of Chicago; faculty member, University of Chicago School of Business and Division of the Social Sciences, 1950-1955; joined the MIT faculty in 1955; professor of management, MIT, 1959-1966; dean, Alfred P. Sloan School of Management, 1959-1966; MIT president, 1966-1971; MIT Corporation chair, 1971-1983; president emeritus and former Corporation chair, 1990- ; numerous public service activities, including member, President's Task Force on Urban Educational Opportunities, 1967-1968, and trustee, National Fund for Minority Engineering Students, 1976-1980; recipient, Eleanor Roosevelt Key Award, 1968.

I grew up in the city of Chicago. I was born there, as my parents had been before me. My grandparents had lived most of their lives in the city, the south side of Chicago. I was born in 1922, so that makes me seventy-five at this point. My schooling was in the public schools. I went to elementary school and then high school, James H. Bowen High School on the south side of Chicago. I was graduated from there literally on the eve of World War II. I was graduated in June of 1939, and the Germans invaded Poland in the autumn of that year.

War put a very big stamp on anybody who was growing up. I suppose every boy in my high-school class was in the service. It was a big city high school, 350 to 400 people in the class. I was very active in my class. We were a multiracial school in that south side of Chicago. There were more Latin Americans—largely Mexican—than black Americans, but there was substantial minority representation. My good friend Lawrence Morris was the star of our basketball team, among other things. He was a good friend of mine.

It was a diverse neighborhood, but diversity was largely expressed in recent and not so recent immigrants. There were a lot of people who spoke a foreign language in their homes—Polish, Lithuanian. I think those were the two big smaller groups of Slavs of various nationalities, all of whom had come in the 1920s to get work. So we had a very diverse neighborhood. I ran for office and was elected. Then I went to college. I went to a school in Chicago—Central College—that nobody has ever heard of because it doesn't exist any more, but it became one that everybody has heard of: It became Roosevelt College and then Roosevelt University. Central College was a four-year college, I got a scholarship and went there. My big hope was to go to the University of Chicago, which was really close to us in terms of neighborhood, but I couldn't afford that. So I went to Central and studied economics and political science. Those were my two fields. I started out in physics and enjoyed it, and probably would have stayed if the department had been better.

Central became Roosevelt at the end of the war. The president, whom I had come to know well, was a man named Sparling. He was asked by the board to furnish a list of students and faculty by race. He said, "We don't have that data and if we did I wouldn't give it to you." They said,

Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence Williams with Howard W. Johnson in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 19 November 1997.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

"You've got to give it to us. We're trying to raise money during the war to keep going here." He said, "No, I can't do it." So he quit.

I went into the army at the beginning of 1943, and spent the next three years in the U.S. Army. I came out. I had hopes and expectations that I would go on to graduate work. I was admitted to the University of Chicago department of economics. I got my degree there. Then I was invited to join the faculty. I joined the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1950 as an assistant professor, when I finished my graduate work. I taught there, and assumed and expected that I would stay. Chicago had a strong economics department, has a strong economics department. I assumed that was where I was going to end up. Then one day I got a call from a man named Eli Shapiro. He was associate dean of the Sloan School. I knew him because he had been a professor at the University of Chicago, and had come to MIT in 1950. He said, "Are you interested in looking at MIT?" Well, I really knew of MIT but had no real interest in moving to New England. I thought I was a middle-Westerner. I survived in the mid-West. I liked the city of Chicago. I thought it was a lively place. I seemed to be getting along pretty well. So, anyway, I came to MIT and thought it was marvelous. They had more spark and fire here. It wasn't only an academic place, it was a place that was interested in what was happening in industry. So, they made me an offer.

I was very much impressed with MIT. Chicago is a great university, but it's very secure in the sense that it is a great university and in a sense a little bit precious about its history and its times—all of which isn't bad in a university. It was a socially sensitive place, still is. I've had contacts there through the years. But I was very pleased because I was convinced that after the war—after my period of two years in Europe—I had seen so much destruction that I was going to get involved in something that would have an effect on society's problems. I was going to get into the social sciences. I wanted to make a difference.

So that's what happened. MIT made me an offer and I came here in 1955 as an associate professor. I became dean when Pennell Brooks retired in 1959. Then I was elected president in December of 1965 and took office July 1, 1966.

*Back in the early days of the Sloan School, do you have any sense about your impressions of the environment, particularly with regard to race relations?*

I think the short answer is that there was very little sensitivity to racial questions at MIT in general in those days. MIT's by-word was, "Everybody is equal, this is a meritocracy," although they didn't use that word. "Everybody's welcome, twenty-five percent of our students"—I remember hearing that—"are the first generation of their families to go to college; once you're here we'll try to help you through; what you do with your life is your business." I would say the general tone and tenor in the 1950s was the difference in night and day from what it became even ten years later.

The Sloan School was, of course, quite a small school in those days. We had grown out of Course XV. Most of our students had high expectations of management careers. It was a male school. When they said to me that MIT was a school for men to work and not for boys to play, they meant men and boys in the gender sense. Not that there hadn't been women at MIT from the beginning—we were very proud of Ellen Swallow Richards—but there were relatively few in management. Of course, I was almost instantly aware of it because it was not where I came from. But it's a fact that that's what it was.

Now there were minor changes, but I would say minuscule. The changes on the women's front really began in the early 1960s. I found it curious that the size of our undergraduate class in women was limited to the capacity of a very small residence dormitory, something like fourteen. I'm not relying on data here, but it was something like that. While we had an occasional black American, typically they would have been people who would have had what I would call a privileged life, you know. I remember someone whose name doesn't immediately come to me, but his parents had been in the diplomatic corps. I remember how impressed I was with him and I realized he had had a lot more opportunity than I ever had. He had gone to prep schools. He wasn't my concept of somebody who had come up from nothing.

*Some of the ones you had grown up with in Chicago.*

No. My friend Lawrence Morris is long dead. He never went to college. Of course, only ten percent of my class went to college. That was about normal in those days in a city like Chicago. When I

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

went back to my fiftieth reunion, of course they looked at me as kind of an oddball. Most of them spent their lives in the mills—you know, marvelous people, but they led the life of what I would call the lower middle-class American.

*You mentioned that period between coming from Chicago as a professor to coming here. During that period, there was a very major event in 1954 when* the Brown v. Board of Education *case came before the Supreme Court.*

The major case.

*Do you remember where you were and how that affected things around you at that time?*

I do. Yes, absolutely. I would say the University of Chicago was very interested in questions of what I would call equality. In my own interest by that time, my thesis had been in labor economics. Of course, in Chicago we had a number of great industries. One was the meat-packing industry. The work force there, my memory of it—we're talking about an hourly work force—I wouldn't be surprised if it was about fifty percent black, and the other fifty percent were probably Polish and eastern Europeans who had just arrived. Many of these people had arrived in Chicago, as I said earlier, in the 1920s—both the black and the white work force. I spent a lot of time on work floors talking to those people. I was very sensitive to it. The University of Chicago had a substantial black cadre in the faculty and quite a noticeable number of black students. That was the character of that city, you know. It was a multi-racial city, very much so. I must say when you came to a place like New England, Boston was different from that in those days. Cambridge was different. It was a white city, by and large, as far as you were aware of it.

But I would say things began to change. Two massive things happened to America in the early 1960s. Of course, nothing starts out of nothing; it has to have foundations. There were two major things, one for the good and one for the evil. We began to get enmeshed in the Vietnam War by the mid-1960s, by the end of the Kennedy term, and we began to see deep involvement in that war, which is the one big thing that marred America's promise, I think, for a long time to come. And the other big thing was on the positive side. We had the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, we had Martin Luther King, we had the beginnings of what we used to call at Chicago the vitalization of the Emancipation Proclamation. That's what we called it.

Now that was beginning to happen in the country. I can remember I sat on our commencement platform beginning in 1959. I was a brand new dean and then, as now, the deans read the names of the graduates. I had no thought, incidentally, that I was ever going to be president of this great institution. If you had suggested that to me, I would have said, "You're out of your mind. That is not going to happen. I'm from a discipline from which we probably shouldn't draw the president." We probably should draw the president from one of our major core strengths of either science or engineering.

I can remember looking out over that commencement crowd and saying to myself, "We just have one kind of student here and he is male and he is white, and that's going to change." But it wasn't going to change overnight. When I became president, a major step had already been taken in terms of women, although the numbers were almost non-existent. But Jay Stratton, my predecessor—a great, decent man—and Jim Killian, who was the chairman, they had completed the arrangement by which Mrs. McCormick would provide for the funding of the first half of that building, the women's dormitory. The building was just coming on stream that fall that I became president. So the problem was the second half, which I worked on, and the middle joiner. Mrs. McCormick was still alive—a grand old lady, class of 1904. It stunned me to think that this woman could look at me and say, "Dr. Johnson, this institution had the greatest influence on my life and I want to help it." So she gave the second half for McCormick which we dedicated.

Anyway, even getting that going our admissions people used to say, "There are only a certain number of young women who are interested in science and engineering." Even after we began to admit them, and the numbers began to be noticeable, I remember somebody in admissions—a very serious person who had studied the problem—saying, "The maximum that we will ever get is twenty to twenty-five percent women. That's the maximum and that's way out because women aren't interested in our subjects."

So that had started. I was interested. I appointed Jerry Wiesner as provost. We appointed Paul Gray assistant provost in 1968, I believe.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

Walter Rosenblith became associate provost and Paul got the assignment of greatly increasing our black enrollment. I believe by 1968 or '69, certainly by 1969—despite all the other problems, we had some other things to worry about in those days, of course, such as the war—we were admitting into the freshman class fifty students who were black Americans. We began that summer program, you know.

*Project Interphase.*

Yes, Project Interphase. I appointed a man named Jim Bishop, a wonderful guy. He was appointed, I believe, in 1968. I know we really had an all-out effort going on and I thought we were making headway. But then we had a meeting with the Black Student Union and they said, "You're not making headway enough." They couldn't have been more right on that score. But then enters one of the great figures in this history, Shirley Jackson. I don't know whether she was the head of the Black Student Union at that point, was she?

*Yes, she was.*

But she was the head of it *in fact*, with that wonderful calm voice of hers. We began to get some real results. The Black Student Union volunteered and took on going out and visiting high schools. They visited well over a hundred high schools. I'm just relying on memory here. I used to meet with Shirley and other members. Then some other things were happening that kind of set a pattern. I took a strong position in the Corporation on this matter. We had never had an African American as a member of the Corporation. I found that unbelievable. They said to me, "Well, who? Almost all of our members are MIT alumni. That automatically almost excludes blacks." I said, "In this case, we have to go outside." I fortunately had a good friend, Brud Holland. Does that name ring a bell?

*Oh, absolutely. I knew him very well. He was my mentor at Hampton Institute. He's responsible for me getting my Ph.D. and played a major role in many of my other accomplishments.*

I didn't know that. Well, I knew him because as president I saw him at Hampton. We had meetings on occasion. For some reason or another, we hit it off. He had been at Cornell and he had been a great figure there. He was a serious academic. So I asked him, maybe as early as 1967, would he consider becoming a Corporation member. And I explained, "We have an institution that does not have a black member on its board." I brought him on the board of Federated too—Federated Department Stores—which was a company that I was going to head, I suppose, at some point if I hadn't become president of MIT. He was a very good board member there. So he came on at MIT and the year following I had come to know a man by the name of Whitney Young. Whitney was the head of the Urban League. Brud introduced me to him. I liked him immediately in terms of his real interest in education. The problem was he was getting asked by everybody by that point, you know. But he agreed, and he joined our Corporation.

So those were the first two people. And of course, there were many after that—very often young people because the other big thing that we did at MIT at that point was to put in younger people. It was a wonderful Corporation, but their average age was fifty-five plus and the median was probably about sixty. So how do you get young people to have a voice? We had, of course, turmoil all over and we had the representatives of recent classes. It always impressed me that almost every year the person nominated and elected happened to be a black American—it's interesting to look at that list—or a woman, one of the two. And you could see why.

So we've had that. There was a black and we also had the first female member of the Corporation, Mary Frances Wagley. Then I became chairman of the Corporation in 1971.

*When you were president from 1966 to 1971, that was a very turbulent time and as president you had to deal with some really, really tough issues—demonstrations and all kinds of things. Could you give us an overview of how you viewed each of these developments, particularly the ones relating to race? It was a tough period, and I don't think there has been another president who had to deal with such tough kinds of things.*

It was a terrible time in terms of people in the country. The interesting thing to me, as I've thought about it, nobody yet has written about that who was in a position of leadership in the American college and university. I'm trying to put together something now that focuses on that period. But as I thought about it, what I've discovered and thought seriously about is that the Vietnam War was the focus of much of that—and especially at a place like MIT where we had the two big laboratories and a lot of defense-supported research. We seemed to be a lightning rod,

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

along with all the other issues of inequity in the forces, the sort of imperialism that principled young people rose up to fight and resist. There were other things going on. The Vietnam War was the focus, but I'd say the second most important thing was the civil rights issue—the issue of equity and equality, a principle unredeemed that the country stood for. I was and am a strong believer in the American republic. I think it's the best and the greatest, but we've fallen short in vital areas, and the largest one is the question of the races feeling equal in terms of opportunity, equal in terms of share, equal in terms of self-regard, all those things.

So that was the second thing. And then the gender issue, the male-female issue—that's the third one. But then there were a whole lot of things that are kind of hard to put your finger on. We had a revolution going on in the social mores, whether it was music or whether it was all that other stuff that went on. I had forgotten all about it, but somebody was telling me about live theater or something like that. And, of course, we had the drugs issue in a major way. That entered American life for the first time. And then there was the sexual freedom issue—for the first time, the widespread introduction of the pill—that seemed to change the whole notion of you and me functioning as college administrators *in loco parentis*. You know, the sex urge is still the strongest urge that mankind and womankind have ever felt, and there it is when you get all these young people just coming out of adolescence.

So all those things were focused at once. You had to have a president, I believe, who could still keep an eye on the long distance but deal with all these things at once. I didn't do it all myself. I had awfully good people and we had a great faculty and a pretty wise student body, but you did have to have a certain amount of leadership involved.

*No question about it. In fact, around the time of your inauguration, Jay Forrester wrote an article in which he described you as "an excellent judge of people," someone with "unwavering standards of integrity, fairness, and quality . . . and an innovative attitude."*
I never heard that before. He's a tough judge.

*Also, in a speech—which proves his point—you delivered to the 44th Annual Convention of the National League of Cities in August 1967, you took academia to task for what you called "its sense of isolation and aloofness from human society and from the institutional obligations of citizenship." What, in your view, were the major failings of the universities generally and MIT specifically in this regard during that period of the late 1960s?*
I tell you, I felt that strongly. That represents my views of the university. I think you could understand some of the reason for it. Everybody, almost everybody, had emerged from World War II with all of the terrible nature of all those parts of it and suddenly to find ourselves at peace in the 1950s. I'm trying to think of the justification for it, but the universities tended to retreat into the ivory tower. They said, "We'll study these issues." I thought the city was clearly beginning to fade around us. We began and we persuaded the Ford Foundation to begin major funding for the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Affairs. It had to deal with the city. We got the money for it—Nathan Pusey and I—and the issue was to be to study urban decay. I wrote into it the decay of citizenship as well as the decay of buildings. The Ford Foundation said that was a good idea, so they appointed a fellow that I had heard of but had never met. They proposed the appointment, and I said fine, of Daniel Patrick Moynihan as the first chair. And he was very good. He was excellent at it. And then a fellow named Bob Wood succeeded him when Pat went off to work with Rockefeller, I guess.

But I *felt* that, what I said there. I joined two organizations that I tried to awaken and in part succeeded. One was the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME). I thought I had a special grip on companies. You know, I could talk to CEO's. They didn't overimpress me. I had seen many of them and they're outstanding people. They wouldn't be where they are otherwise, but they very often had blind spots and what I would call short-range vision.

*Did you say you started NACME?*
I was only one of many. I think there were maybe twenty of us. It had to do with opportunity for minorities. Then we had it funded and there was another organization called the National Fund. I don't think they exist any more, do they?

*They still exist.*
They do?

*Yes, they do. It's still going and going very strong. And it has made a major difference.*
It certainly was making a major difference, but I hadn't heard much about it lately. Anyway, those

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

were two organizations I was involved with. So when I said that to the cities, the reason I was invited to give that speech was because we had just given new life to the Joint Center for Urban Studies. I was invited to give the speech. I got a lot of criticism for that because the feeling was that the universities had no business in this area. But can you imagine this after John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in a city, Martin Luther King had been assassinated? Of course, that was 1968 and I guess you said the speech was given in 1967. But it was part of the same thing. And then Bobby Kennedy was assassinated: 1968 was a terrible year for the country, for every part of the country including the universities.

But I do feel that we were a stronger university when we emerged because we did have some direction and we did have some continuing management. I haven't ever said this before, but I've always been happy that the team that I put together continued and they've been in a sense involved—Jerry Wiesner and Paul Gray and several of the deans and people like John Wynne and Constantine Simonides. You know, they carried on.

*Well, it's a very important point, Howard. You're such a quiet mover that a lot of people are not aware of the major decisions that you made during that period—decisions that have created people like Jerry and Paul, who have been very much involved in these issues such as affirmative action that we're talking about. But how they got there: They would never have gotten there, for example, if you had not appointed Paul as a young professor to be in charge of the Task Force on Educational Opportunity. And Paul admits it. He said to me that he's not sure that he would have been president had he not been appointed and involved in these activities to increase the minority presence on campus early in his career.*

I think that's right. And one of our problems always is to pick people early.

*You knew how to do it.*

I remember watching Paul one day. He was chairing a committee and he has that—he had then—that sort of bull-dog tenacity if he believed something was right. And similarly, nobody would have picked Jerry because Jerry, who was my dearest friend and we worked very closely together for twenty years, had come back from Washington as a kind of golden boy, you know. He had floated around in the outer stratosphere and he had strong, what I would call partisan political views, which of course is great, but because of it I would say that Jerry wouldn't have been chosen as a provost by most presidents. In those days, he tended to be very outspoken.

*Well, you like people like that.*

But I like people like that. Like Brud Holland. I remember Brud standing up in a Corporation meeting and he said, "We cannot go on this way in this institution." He was talking about scholarships at MIT. Everybody was surprised. It was as if to say, "Shouldn't you write that and send it in the mail instead of standing here?" No, Brud is somebody who's not appreciated here because he died too quickly for one thing. But also he wasn't appreciated, I would say, by the Black Student Union. He looked too successful to the black students. He looked like he was somebody's fair-haired boy. Well, he wasn't.

*That's right.*

He won every inch of ground like all of us have.

*Well, it's interesting because both of you sort of came out of the same kind of background.*

I don't know Brud's background.

*Oh, he came from a very poor background.*

Did he?

*Yes. Oh yes, very much so.*

I never realized that.

*What were the most important new ideas and programs during your administration and what impact did they have on related ideas and programs as we know them today?*

There's one program that had a very large impact on me before I was president. I was the dean of the Sloan School, as we've been saying. I failed on one score. One of the things that I wanted to do was bring some real-life experience to the faculty of Sloan. We systematically got the best new Ph.D's who had written the Ford Foundation prize theses as assistant professors. We were getting all those super-bright people, which we needed. We were refashioning the education for management. We changed the management school concept completely. We and Carnegie Tech were the two. But we weren't getting people who knew what the world was all about, so we began to bring such people. We appointed them at first, because of the system, as lecturers. They included people like

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

John Collins, the former mayor of Boston, because I wanted the people in that school—the seniors in the undergraduate part and the graduate students—to get a sense of what the city was like. We couldn't do it through our city planning department because they were more technical people—you know, city design. Many didn't understand the guts of what a city was all about.

We got Carroll Wilson. He had run a company and had been at MIT—a very distinguished guy—but I had never met him. Elting Morison told me about him. I called him and went out to see him. He said, "Well, I just sold this company and I'm kind of ..." I said, "You've got to teach a course on starting up a company." This is the long way to answer your question about programs and what they've become. Carroll joined us and the first thing he wanted to do—and this is what impressed me—was to start the Fellows in Africa Program. We didn't call it that then, but he said, "There's a gap over there. The great colonies are removing their colonial leadership—French, British, both—and there's a gap. The leaders who have come up need bright young assistants who have modern ways of dealing with questions of finance and commerce and those kinds of topics that we teach here."

So we began that, and over the period in which the program was going, we sent well over a hundred people who spent two years each. It was later called one of the designs for the Peace Corps. And it changed participants' lives, all of them. They all have gone into judgeships if they came out of a legal background, or International Monetary Fund, or World Bank, or college presidencies, things like that. That was about exposure to a set of problems that they couldn't have imagined, and that meant a great deal.

What we did when I became president, I tried to find programs—first of all, an absolute follow-through on the question of commitments to increased numbers. So that's how Paul became assistant provost. That was a big job in those days—it never existed before—this issue of expanding numbers of minorities in the classes. What he couldn't do, though, was deal with the question of faculty. We had a number of faculty members who were interested in that. Al Hill became interested and eventually I asked him to look at the laboratories.

*Head a commission.*

Yes, and he really became interested. He became very interested in black students who were interested in engineering. I don't know whether the record shows that, but he was very good at it.

*It shows.*

And he believed in it. We had others, but getting a faculty member—believe it or not—was tough in those days. We had another great man here. He and I often found ourselves on the wrong side of the table on issues related to the war, but he knew and I knew that we appreciated each other's integrity. It was a fellow, same name as mine—Johnson, Willard Johnson.

*He's one of your first hires.*

Yes, he was. Absolutely, but in political science. I wanted to get somebody in physics, in the core of the business. That was tougher. But a fellow—Ted Martin, who was in mathematics—was very helpful. I mentioned Al. Ted Murphy from the Campbell Soup Company, a member of the Corporation, said, "You keep saying in executive committee we've got to get more black members of the faculty. I've got a fellow for you." I said, "Give me his name." He says, "I don't have it, but I'll have it for you this afternoon." When he called back, he said "Frank Jones." Frank was a hot shot at the Scott Paper Company. He had come out of Harvard Business School. I called him. He said, "I'm perfectly situated to do a job here. I don't want to get into teaching. It's not relevant and I can have a bigger influence as an executive." I said, "Maybe." He came and we spent a couple of days together. I said, "Frank, I will hire you as assistant to the president." He said, "I've been assistant and it doesn't mean anything." So we got in touch with some people who were department heads, and Charlie Miller—head of civil engineering—said, "I'll give him a job as assistant director of the Urban Systems Laboratory"; it was engineering, transportation, and so on. Then he became, after a couple of years, full professor in civil engineering.

*This was when you were president, right?*

Yes, but Frank was a tough case because he didn't want to come. As I could understand, the world was his oyster. He was going to rise in that company without question. He was already a marketing manager. But I said this to Frank, "Do you want to go to your deathbed saying to yourself

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

that you were the biggest salesman of paper products in the world, or do you want to say you worked at one of the world's great educational institutions and made a difference in the lives of a lot of young people?" And he said, "Well, I'll think about it." We didn't have a job for him at that point, but we did in time.

And there were a couple of others like that, but we still haven't solved that problem. We've made progress. I hope a lot of people feel that way. There have been years in which I thought we were not [solving it]. But when I think of what life was like before—for a lot of people growing up in Chicago and especially if they were people of color—it was a miserable life. But I believe the country has made progress. There are a lot of people who are giving up on the question of whether we can ever be one society. I don't want to give up on that. I think we have made headway. You look at the data of incomes and so on, and we are making headway, but we certainly haven't made the progress that we should have made.

*Would you have thought, when you look back on all the efforts that you made as president and directed the institution as chairman of the Corporation, that we would have made more progress than we've made now?*
I believe I thought then that we would make greater progress. I was very hopeful because I'm basically hopeful. I think I'm an optimist by nature. I think of our students here and I would match our black American students as a group, those that I've seen, against any group from any university that I know of. I think they've been great. What I am sorry about is that they haven't had a bigger impact—that we can see at least, that you and I can see—on the people around them. The young men and young women I've seen recently, they go on to great careers, but I guess I was expecting too much. I thought each one of those people would influence a lot of other people, and I don't think that has happened. Plus, the society is very obdurate now.

But in answer to your question—should we have been further ahead?—Yes, I think so. Why should we have what we have in the board of regents at the University of California now, that great state taking the position that equal opportunity is not needed? We still need it. I believe the time will come. My hope was that when those laws were passed, I thought by the end of the century we would have made real progress. That was my goal. I had two goals—one to live long enough to see the end of the twentieth century, second to see that issue resolved. I think that when you see that happening in California, it's a shame. That's the way I think of it. It's a shame. I think that there will come a time when we don't need it. Maybe it's going to relate to income or something, maybe it shouldn't be classified as a racial issue, maybe it should be in terms of income—white, black, Asian, Mexican income. If you get somebody like Jack Tang, who had three generations of great Chinese who had been here at MIT, the children, the great-grandchildren of the man who first came in and gave MIT the money for Tang Hall down here, they don't need any advantage. And your children and my children certainly don't need advantage. But, a lot of people still do and that's the way I sort of come out on it. But have we made headway on some things? I'm awfully proud of MIT in so many ways.

*In a statement that you made after you stepped down as MIT president in 1970, you warned against the danger of politicizing the university.*
Yes.

*What did you have in mind overall and how, if at all, would you relate this comment to racial issues both at that time and since?*
I did not have the racial issues in mind at that time. I was thinking of the upheavals of the university. In terms of the faculty, I was worried about it, even at MIT. I can describe it best through a student group that I met with at that time. This group said, "We need more strength at the national level to enforce equality." I said, "I agree with that, what kind?" Well, then they went on to describe it in terms of political parties. Of course, this particular group wanted a strong leftist party. This is the SDS group. They wanted, they said, to take apart the judicial system and create a people's court for crimes against humanity. In some ways you could say it was youthful fervor, but it wasn't all that because they were tough. They were throwing big rocks at that point.

It would seem as though I am saying that we should not take a position, but I believe that the university must take positions related to issues like equality. When I say equality, I mean equality of opportunity. I don't mean that everybody is at the same level. Obviously, we have to believe to a large

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

extent in meritocracy in the university. We're training and educating the best, but the corollary to that is opportunity has responsibility. You have to have responsibility to do your share, to bring the society along. We had vicious political fights at MIT and every other university during that period—largely, I believe, because of the Vietnam War. But then everybody got very politicized. After Nixon came in in November of 1968, it became more politicized than ever.

The other issue of politicization that I was concerned about was that we were getting to the point—and it certainly was true at Harvard—that if you had an unpalatable point of view, unpalatable to the crowd, you were booed and hissed off the stage. That happened many times. I think the basic tenet of the university is that it's a free society, you can speak your piece and get a hearing, and people give you a chance to give your views. I believe that political correctness is a big mistake. It's in that sense that I'm talking about politicization. I think that that in the long run would damage the university. It's like what happened in the great German universities, being politicized in the 1930s and pretty soon you had to be a member or at least somebody on the fringes of the Nazi or fascist movement. And there were signs of that in the 1960s. I think they've disappeared and that's pretty good, but I think they've disappeared because people like me and others were saying it was a danger.

*In your annual report of 1968, you identified what you called "opportunities for the Negro" . . .*
Is that the word I used?

*Well, it was appropriate during that time. I mean, it really was.*
Yes.

*. . . as one of the urgent priorities of your administration.*
Absolutely.

*How do you assess what you accomplished or failed to accomplish in this regard?*
I failed in lots of ways, I suppose. I think we began some things—important things—and I think we've talked about some of them. I really believe that statement. It was a major issue. We were sidetracked, I think. I had thought that I would remain president for ten years, but I left after five for two reasons. I think I was just getting awfully tired and I think if I had continued I wouldn't be here today.

*I was going to ask you that.*
I was chairman for twelve years. That was the structural problem. Jim Killian had told me he didn't want to be chairman any more. He was sixty-seven, and in those days you really looked at sixty-five as the retirement age. I asked him to stay on two extra years. So the question was, if we had had the wrong person as chairman, it would have been a mistake for us. So, I was asked would I take the chairmanship. If I had known who was going to be the chairman, I would have stayed as president for a little longer. But it worked out. I was a very strong proponent of Jerry Wiesner succeeding me, and then Paul Gray being positioned in that administration so he could follow if he continued to perform, you know. It's all dependent on good luck and high performance. Life is a very touchy thing.

*You are a very quiet person, but on the other hand you're very much like the people you like who are tough. For example, that decision to appoint Jerry was not a liked decision, as you well know, with him being Jewish.*
Absolutely. Those issues were even, in a sense, more strident. Then, when I appointed Walter Rosenblith as associate provost, I used to get mail from alumni on both issues. I wouldn't call it hate mail, but strongly critical mail. It's just like one fellow once said to me, when we had students in my office occupying the office. A rather well-known alumnus said, "Why don't you go in and get them out of there? If you have to use bayonets, use them, but you may not know anything about that business." And for once I got very annoyed. Fortunately, my mother taught me never to lose my temper, but I came close to it that day.

I would say that our faculty in general had seen more of the real world than most, at least in my experience. That doesn't mean that we didn't occasionally have a faculty member who hadn't. One said to me once, a rather distinguished faculty member, during that period, "I'm not going to give a student C, I'm going to give them all A's because if I give them a C they might be drafted and they might go to Vietnam and die." That's a tough one to deal with. I said, "Well, you've got to grow up. You're a professor trying to help that man develop. Is the best way to help him develop to shield him from the world? There's no way. You can't make that judgment." And a term later he said, "I've thought a lot about it, and you're right."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

But that was part of the distortion of the time. Everybody had these tremendous feelings of guilt. Curious times.

*If you had any advice that you would offer to outstanding young black people who aspire to be in our domain, whether they be students or whether they be faculty members, what advice would you give them if they were considering coming to a place like MIT?*

That's a very serious and good question. The problem with advice is that we draw from the experience in our own lives and that might not be appropriate for the young person you're talking to. But what I would tell her or tell him is something that had an influence on me. The trouble is that when I say it to my sons, it doesn't quite communicate the way it hit me. Here's what it is. I attribute it to Abraham Lincoln, who still is my great president. What he said was, "I will study and prepare and some day my chance will come." He said it in a different way than that, but that's what it meant. But it sounds—coming from an older person, I think, to a student—kind of axiomatic, not really realistic. But I believe it is realistic for a college-level student. I believe they've got to get a hold of their ideals and I believe they've got to prepare and get as much involvement in the world as they can, because they will get a chance.

I've always enjoyed it when I met with black students in years past. And I would say, but I know it didn't go across, that they would have great opportunities, they really would have great opportunities, and everyone that I've known as an individual has that great opportunity and has gone on. I could see these young people who had been on the Corporation, women and men both, have far better opportunities than you and I had. Part of it, though, you have to tell them, is luck. You need some good luck and you have to love your parents and all those things, but the best thing that you can control is to prepare. I don't think that goes over too well, but it's the only thing you can control.

*You have had all of the experiences at this institution, you've seen it from bottom to top, you've orchestrated it in so many ways. When you look at it in the present time, in 1997, if you had your magic wand, what kinds of things would you think you would do to enhance the experience of blacks at the Institute?*

I think we're doing a lot, but somehow I don't think we're doing enough. One thing I've been very strongly for—and I've written about it to Chuck Vest and to others—is that we've got to create a better living situation here at MIT. I'm talking long-run. You can't do it right away. But I think if I had my magic wand, you say, I'd use it for one thing. I believe under the circumstances maybe it was a mistake. I wasn't the only one. When Jerry Wiesner felt strongly about it, and Joe Snyder felt strongly about it, we bought that so-called Simplex land. My hope was that we could create what I'd call the dormitory looking on the city of Cambridge, a place where our students—especially undergraduate students; not necessarily graduate students, they're already more mature, but our undergraduate students, the seventeen-, eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds, which after all is pretty young—would find a community in which they could see the city but also were part of this community where they could associate with each other and associate with more faculty. I had this in mind and we never had the opportunity to go very far with it. But I often felt that if we had Mr. Sloan alive at the time, we could have persuaded him to build some housing for faculty where our faculty could be closer so they could see the students in off times.

We have achieved a diverse student body. Look at our student body. I've sat, I think, on every commencement platform since 1959, and that's nearly forty years. You look at those faces and it's no longer white males. We have a wonderful, I think, reflection of the modern American society. Maybe that's true of the faculty, but to a lesser extent. But we certainly are getting women and in time, I believe, we will have better diversity there. At the present time it's not, but it's getting better somehow. I'm not sure what your reaction to that would be.

*Well, it's not in terms of black faculty.*

It isn't.

*No.*

I was going to say, it isn't in terms of black faculty.

*We have about fourteen black faculty members.*

Is that all?

*Yes. It's less than twenty.*

But we had more than that in 1971, I believe, maybe fudging a little bit on visitors.

*You had just as many then as you have now. It's very close. I mean, it's such a small difference.*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

I didn't realize that. But if we had places where the faculty first of all were comfortable with each other, that would be a big help. You know, that's part of the problem too there. They drive in, as I did. But I had the best experience after I moved on campus. I lived on the campus as president and chairman and then for all my active years up until the last two. We had the land to build faculty housing, and now that opportunity, I believe, is gone. There had to be some battles fought with the city, but I think they could have been won. We had some pretty good support lined up.

But I think that's what I would do. You can't change the faculty overnight, but you can change the environment. And I believe that's what I would focus on. It doesn't sound very important, but in another ten years it could make a huge difference, I believe, don't you think so?

*Well, I think so and I think it's important to understand your view on this because it's a very timely one. We're talking about housing our students now, for example, in terms of whether a freshman should stay on campus and be required to do so. Dealing with the issue of housing and where people stay is what you're saying, if I understand you correctly.*

Absolutely. I believe we are going to teach that whole range of issues. In a practical way, people can be together. And I don't want to exclude them from the city, you know what I'm saying? I want to have that. Let's say, suppose we could raise a hundred million dollars? That would go a long way. Focus it on that issue, the way men and women—faculty and students—are going to live together. When I was the dean, we had the Sloan School Building. Of course, it was then called the School of Industrial Management. But we got Mr. Sloan to put up the money for that, the next building, and then cleared out some of the old junk all the way down. And it made a big difference. It made a big difference in the way people treated each other.

I do believe—and this will betray an old-fashioned thing in my life, and it isn't appropriate now—I think it would be better if our society was a little more civil toward each other. You know, my mother was a very good mother as most of our mothers were. I'll tell you this little story. You will appreciate it, I think. We were walking together on our way, I suppose, to church or some place together and a man I knew in our neighborhood, who was a black American, came up. He said, "Hello, Mrs. Johnson." She said, "Hello, Mr. so-and-so," whatever his last name was. I said, "Hello, Bill," and when we got out of range she took me—not by the ear, she never I don't think ever laid a hand on me—in a way that got my attention. She said, "Howard, I never want to hear you call him by his first name again. He's your senior and you'll call him "Mister."

Boy, did that make an impression on me. Now that's what I call a civil society. I was no more than eight years old. I had no business. He was a kind of fellow who was a handyman in the neighborhood. I knew him; he was a very nice guy. But she was right, she was right. I've never forgotten it.

*I can really appreciate that. It says so much about why you are who you are.*

Do you remember the baseball commissioner who spoke at our commencement a few years ago, the former president or acting president of Yale? Then he became the baseball commissioner?

*Yes.*

Quite a guy. I never knew him except when he appeared and spoke to the students. We walked in the procession and, sitting there, you make small talk. We're talking about that and his experiences in New Haven. He said that it was a small point with him, but he said the level of conversation that he hears when he goes back to the campus now makes the ballplayers look kind of civil to each other. He was talking about the students. But the question of respect for your fellow human being—innate, honest respect—how do you teach that? I don't know how to teach it, except mothers saying to their brat child, "I don't want to ever hear you say that again." And boy, it made a difference in that neighborhood. It did make a difference.

*Well, obviously it has made a major difference in terms of how you have dealt with your career and how you have had such a tremendous effect on a place like MIT.*

Well, we should have done more, but it's a great place to be and I'm glad you're there, I must say. May I ask you a question too?

*Sure.*

In the same line that you were just saying, what could we do in terms of our black students that would make this a better place? What you've just said about the numbers of faculty, is there any hope of improving that?

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023

*Well, I think there is possibly hope, but I do believe that we as an institution, Harvard as an institution, and some of our other great institutions are going to have to have people who will stand up and actually make rules—contrary to what the times suggest one should do—to show that you aren't in agreement with the way things are at the present time. When I think about some of the people whom you actually selected during the late 1960s and early 1970s, these were people who had what I call guts.*
Yes, that's a good word for it.

*I frankly don't see that. I don't see that at a time when I think we really need it, when we have a conservative kind of mood.*
This is the time you need that.

*This is the time when you need to not talk it but show it. That is, there's nothing that sounds better than to be able to just put it out there and people see it. This is what I believe in. I think we're doing that to some extent with women—and we still have more to do there—but I don't see that we're doing it well with blacks.*
But it's much easier. The women thing is going to come, you can see it coming.

*But when we look at two particular areas at the institution, I think we should be able to deal with them in a way that we don't have to talk but just simply show by our actions. One is that I think that we have a large group of Asian students and our population of the Asian faculty is growing to a certain extent. You should be able to see that representation through our administration as well. I say the same thing for African Americans. We should not be in a position where we do not have, say, a legitimate person in the main structure of the institution.*
Absolutely, a real core position.

*We've been at it since you started this task force, since 1968, and we have only had one black person who was a senior officer. This person was Shirley McBay. We haven't had anything in that arena since she left. We have not, faculty-wise, had but one black who has been the head of a department, and that was Phil Clay, in urban studies and planning.*
Yes. Is he is the only one?

*He is the only one. There are still departments that do not have and have not had an African American as a faculty member. I think we have to do some things.*
I don't believe we have one in my own school. When I left the Sloan School, we had had several, but I'm thinking now.

*You just had the first tenured faculty member in your school from last year. He was promoted to a tenured position. His name is William Qualls.*
Oh yes.

*The last one you had was Phyllis Wallace.*
Phyllis, I brought.

*Yes.*
I brought her from Yale as a professor, and she deserved it. She was in my old field and I knew all about Phyllis.

*But when you look at the people whom you brought in yourself and look at what has happened since then, you would be hard pressed to see much progress. It's not as though there hasn't been an effort from the leadership view, or wanting to have the effort, but there is so much left to be done.*
But I used to say in this field that intentions don't matter, it's results that count. I'm aware of all the problems. I chaired the mathematics visiting committee. I volunteered for that job. This was back some years ago when I left the chairmanship. Mathematics was the toughest department when I became president. We had some splendid people there who took the position, "You don't want to bend any requirements." All the litany—"It does no good to bring somebody here to have to flunk them," and all that. I knew enough about math to know that it's an academic subject like any other academic subject. What those people were reflecting to me—including a great man, a friend of mine now dead, who said, "We Jews had to fight through discrimination, we had to fight"—was in a sense saying, "Let everybody else have to fight through the same battle." If you told him—I'm not going to mention his name—as I did, "Sure, you fought that battle but there were a lot of people with you," and these fellows were coming through one at a time, he didn't go with that.

During all those years that I was chair, every time we raised it—it was always part of the agenda—once in a while they could come up with somebody but the person wouldn't last very long. And their answer was, "There's nobody in the pipeline." The next question is, "What are we doing to help the pipeline?"

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886731/9780262286305_c000600.pdf by guest on 20 March 2023