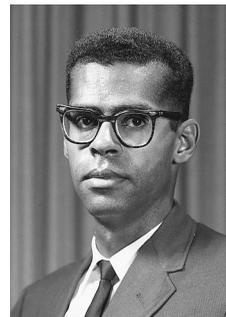


## WILLARD R. JOHNSON

b. 1935, AA 1955 Pasadena City College, BA 1957 (international relations) University of California at Los Angeles, MA 1961 (African studies) Johns Hopkins University, PhD 1965 (political science) Harvard University; joined the MIT faculty in 1964; professor of political science, 1974–1996; emeritus, 1996; director, Business Management for Economic Development Project, Center for International Studies, MIT; executive director, Circle Inc., and New England Community Development Corp., 1968–1970; chair, board of directors, 1970–1973; member, board of directors, TransAfrica and TransAfrica Forum, 1977– ; founder and president, Boston chapter, 1980–1985, 1989.



I'm sure I was moved to a more intellectually oriented or academic career by the fact that my father was a university graduate and was thought of, within the family circle, as very smart. That was the thing that distinguished him. Being like him meant being very smart, or trying to be. He also had had the experience of being first of his race in an important position, when he became the first black professional at Jefferson Barracks Hospital, which produced some newspaper articles that were impressive—to me, anyway, looking back. He was in an allied medical field. A bacteriologist, he owned and operated a medical laboratory. The pressure on me was always to go into medicine. He had wanted to be a physician and my thought had always been that he hadn't been able to afford to be one. Years later, I found there may also have been other blockages along the way, like lack of encouragement.

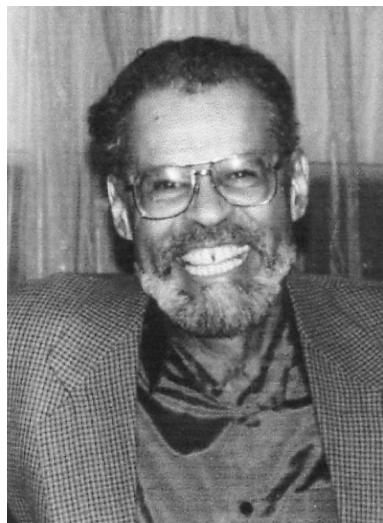
Anyway, the point was that he had not been able to become a physician. We never had an explicit discussion about it, but I always sensed that somehow or another I should do that. But early on, I really lost any real interest in medicine. I used to work with him in the medical laboratory, so I had an exposure to it. Organic chemistry didn't help.

*You didn't particularly excel?*

No, and I was told by a guidance counselor—who happened to be also my organic chemistry teacher—that I was not likely to get into the best medical schools with a poor performance in organic. One of the things that I, looking back,

learned about myself was that chemistry, particularly, seemed to call for memorizing details and being able to hold on to the formula—to know what was going to happen with this compound and that one, specifically. I've never been great about that. I've been great on concepts. I know if one thing is relevant to another, but really remembering in detail lots of facts was not my forte.

So I got off that track and into social, politically-oriented studies. The idea that I would be in a career using my head, that was almost a given. My father, I think, favored me for that. My brother was distinctly not intellectually inclined, so that made it both better and worse, so to speak. My father would focus on me and ignore my brother. I was ambivalent about that, but I don't know that that ambivalence really is relevant one way or the other in my subsequent career.



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Willard R. Johnson in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 20 February 1996.

I remember, for example, that in junior high school I took a philosophy course... No, I guess it was senior high school. I had gone to a high school that was combined with a junior college. It was an experimental thing. I was able to take college courses while I was still in high school. This may have been a college-level philosophy course, which was the most demanding concept-oriented of the courses I had had. I did very well in it. I remember the professor making some remark that made me realize that he thought I was academically oriented, that is to say, that I was going to wind up being a professor of some sort. I didn't realize it at the time, but that must have influenced me. There are little cues along the way that give you some sense that this is an appropriate thing to seek after, that you can do it, that you have the confidence, that things are going to work out. In my church and in a lot of other ways, I tended to be singled out, so I always had this sense that there was some higher expectation of me. In some places or communities in the South, they would say, "I think he's the one."

So they push you forward. All of that seems positive to me, looking back, although in many ways I wasn't aware really how important those things are.

*At this point you were in St. Louis?*

No, I didn't spend much time in St. Louis. I was born in St. Louis and my father had gone into the U.S. Health Service there. I found out some years later that that was because my mother and grandmother had written Eleanor Roosevelt, who actually took account of the letter and did something about it. He had taken the Health Service exam and had placed very high, if not the highest, and then didn't get the job. He had a master's from the University of Chicago in the mid-1920s, although that wasn't the degree he wanted. As I already mentioned, he had wanted to go to medical school. But anyway, the point is that the White House intervened and got him into the U.S. Health Service.

Then, of course, the institution itself took over. He was initially in Jefferson Barracks Hospital in St. Louis, which was an all-white veterans' hospital. The white officials there conspired to get him forcibly reassigned to the black veterans' hospital, which was in Tuskegee, Alabama. That's how we wound up in Tuskegee.

I grew up in Tuskegee, a little segregated town, but it was an academically oriented place with three different bases for a middle class among black folk. You've got the Air Force, the hospital, and Tuskegee Institute. So the notion, again, of all the levels of society being demonstrated to you, was important. But there were also distinctive things about it—first, exposure to a black middle class and an upper class. Looking back on it, I did have a kind of sense of anointment, some might say, but the positive side of it would be just being blessed in ways that you don't appreciate.

I remember my father telling me about this great man George Washington Carver and taking me down to the Institute to his laboratory and pointing him out. It just created an aura around this man. Carver had a little playhouse outside of his laboratory—a model, miniature house that children could play in. He was a very shy person, it seemed. He liked children. He didn't like to interact with them, but he liked to watch them. He would watch us playing from his laboratory. I remember seeing him. Then he died, and at school there was this big hoopla about this great man who had died—that made the connection back with my father's comments—so we filed past the body. I think that's the first dead man I saw, so that's also a deep impression. But with all the discussion about him and my father's discussion about him, I decided on my own to go to his funeral—me in my little raggedy, unpresed clothes, you know. I got to his funeral a little bit late, a harbinger.

That's a memory, that's a connection. I have some sense of "there are such people in this world," I've had some chance to connect with them, and in my own little way I try to make good on this. Tuskegee was a very important kind of anchor for me. I really liked my time there because I was very young, it was rural, semi-rural, et cetera. But my family hated it. They had come from the Midwest. They had come from non- or semi-segregated communities—officially non-segregated; socially, in fact, it was segregated in Kansas. My parents were pushing against the system all the time. They did not have the attitude of being beaten down within that framework. They were going to get out of Alabama as soon as they could. We moved to California, which was different.

*How do you get from Tuskegee to UCLA?*

Well, with a banjo on my knee. The family migrated to Pasadena and I went to high school in Pasadena. The California educational system, you can't beat it. You do well in high school and you've got admission to university and it's free. Even then, for out-of-state people—we weren't out-of-state, we were in-state—tuition was minimal, and for in-state you just had administrative fees. We had something like student fees, seventy dollars a year. And it's first-rate.

So I don't think there was ever much discussion in my family about where I would go to college. I vaguely might have thought about Berkeley, but I didn't know much about it. The point was that UCLA was certainly the closest of the campuses. Santa Barbara was also in existence at that time. You didn't hear much about Davis and Irvine and other places like that. UCLA, Santa Barbara, and Berkeley required that you have an A average in high school to go there. So those were elitist—free, but you couldn't get in without the grades. You could go to the state schools, you know, but that was lower on the ladder. But if you were doing well, the fact that they only took the top also made them look better.

I in fact did not go immediately to UCLA. I went to junior college because I would have had to live on campus at UCLA and the expense of that was too much. I never even considered doing otherwise. I mean, the fact was that I could go to this same high school which was integrated with junior college and it was about six blocks from my house. The first year and a half of college I spent at that local high school/junior college. It was a combination of both. I just continued through.

Then I transferred to UCLA. Pasadena was the only high school system or junior college system, I should say, in the state—I think I'm right, at least we kept saying this—where transfers did not get into difficulty academically when they transferred into the University of California system. In other words, it was good enough so that the tendency was that if you were doing alright at Pasadena City College and you transferred to UCLA, you continued to do alright. The truth of the matter is that there was a night and day difference between the two. I breezed through Pasadena and I got to UCLA and—Whoa! But I did okay. By then I was very politically oriented, so I was active in student politics.

*Talk a little bit about that, because that's very unusual, particularly during the 1950s.*

I did brilliantly in high school. Part of the reason was that when I was in Tuskegee at the segregated "Children's House"—that was the name of our school—I flunked the third grade. The teachers were worried about me because I was bumbling along at the bottom of my class. But when I got to Pasadena and I found that I had already studied the material they were getting to—we had already been through it in Tuskegee—I suddenly knew it and I was then best in the class. That was such a good experience, I didn't want to give it up. It was as if I said to myself, "You've got a head start now, stay out there."

So I did very well. For example, when I took plane geometry, I think it was, I just knew it, it was almost instinctual. I had no problem with it whatsoever. One day the teacher was sick and the substitute didn't show up and the students started goofing off and I got upset and said, "Look, why don't we just go ahead and do the lessons?" So then I taught the class. Somehow or another they let me do it. I mean, we just went on through. The principal evidently came down to see what was going on, and folks were doing their homework on the board and so forth and I was saying whether this was good and that was bad. Then I got called in, "this was great," and so forth and so on. Now I was puffed up a little bit.

Then we came to the end of the term and the awards ceremony. I got all the normal commendations for an "A student." However, I didn't get any special commendations and I saw these other students who were worse students and they got this award and they got that award. And I thought, "Damn, what's going on now?" I wouldn't have thought that it mattered so much, but I guess because of all this other kind of framework I had, such as in the church—I'm superintendent of the Sunday School, I take the initiative, I guess I was a take-charge kind of person—I just assumed that I was going to get this award. I don't remember if I talked to somebody or not, but I was very reflective on it. I said, "Well, what is it?" It did not occur to me that race was the number one factor. Some awards went to football players and basketball players, but I'm a little dense in that regard. So I assumed that the problem was that I was just a one-track guy,

I just had the academics. So I said to myself, “You should do some of this other stuff.”

When I got over to the high school, first thing they did in the orientation session was talk about what awards they have. You could get an award for best student and one for best-rounded person. Best-rounded person was for a combination of academics and leadership and so forth. I decided, “That’s going to be the one I get.” I worked back from that goal. Then I decided I would run for class president. And I did and I won. Subsequently, I held other offices. But it was kind of calculated.

*So this was actually sort of preset in your mind that you were going after these things.*

Well, that one, because I had been so offended by the elementary and the junior high school business. Really, I would say it hurt. I was aware that I was hurt by it, so it was calculated from that point of view.

But then another really profound influence for me was the Pasadena Boys’ Club, which really had an unusual leadership program. The one in Pasadena was one of the leading clubs in the country and one of the most progressive, I subsequently discovered. Tommy Thompson, who was the director of that club, had insisted that it have absolutely the finest everything. They acquired a location that was right at the borderline between the black part of town and the white part of town. The town was not strictly segregated, but blacks did tend to be concentrated in the northwest part of the city. I didn’t know at the time that there had been any real discussion about placing it there. He had to fight for that because the whites were not happy. In the end—I mean, long after—they in fact reversed that and moved the principal location to the heart of the white section, with an ancillary facility in the black section.

They had a woodworking and a metalworking shop. The director of it was a guy named Bob Morgan and he was helped by his wife Lucille. He had been an engineer with some big firm, really didn’t like it, and decided what he’d love to do was work with youth. He came to this club. He was first-rate and he just took me under his wing along with a number of others. I learned to do so many things there, not the least of which was to have a goal and develop a project.

I remember my very first week in Pasadena with my cousin Quincy Jacobs. We went to the Boys’ Club and I saw, as you came into the lobby of the building—it was the location previous to where this fine facility I just talked about was located—this glass case with this huge model of a ship, like they have over in Building 5 at MIT. It was really intricate. It had all of the ropes, sails, and the whole bit. I looked at this thing, and it’s the first time I had really ever seen a model so intricately done. And for some reason I decided I was going to make one just like it. So I set out to do this. Now, that was probably the only project in my experience with Boys’ Club I never finished. It was the first one. I set out to do the most complicated task, but I guess just the effort to try to conceptualize it was good. I would see it there, then I would draw it out, then I would make a plan of it.

Morgan kind of nurtured me along. Over the years, he was really like a second father. I would spend so much of my time at the Boys’ Club. The whole process of having a goal, working on it, planning it out, executing it, taking it to fruition—a lot of this stuff I made wound up on display there, so I always got accolades.

*Was Morgan black?*

No, he was white, but he was great. Then he also started a leadership club, just to help young people understand and relate to each other and learn to take leadership and so forth. I was in that. Then he made sure that I went to camp. I went first as a camper. I was tall, I was mature, I was a “take-charge” kind of fellow. I went to the camp maybe one year as a camper, and then the next year they asked me to come as a counselor. Now I’m counselor over other kids who are really my age. Just because I’m so much taller and bigger than they are, they didn’t know. But it was good training. It was training in how to be a leader in a natural kind of framework. I did that. I was counselor for a couple of years and I was head counselor for a couple of years.

*How old were you when you were a counselor?*

Well, when I first was counselor, I was probably thirteen. I was head counselor by fifteen. I did it until I was about eighteen. It was a very good kind of framework for social development and confidence building, even the crafts part of it. You have a project, you see it through. All of mine tended to

be grandiose projects, but I finished all of the rest of them besides that boat. I entered the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild and I worked on that model car for a year, but I didn't win anything.

So those were influences that really were grounding. I can't remember any discussion with Bob Morgan about career. There must have been something, but certainly the expectation of being in leadership, you're almost nurtured in that and you learned to keep pushing yourself to do a little bit better. Then my cousin Quincy, with whom I was very, very close, also had his own set of aspirations. He really wanted to be a pilot and an engineer in aeronautics. But he died in our youth from Hodgkin's Disease. We never thought about sports as an outlet, we never thought about anything frivolous as an outlet, and all of that sort of reinforced my prior character.

So when I finally get into the high school and I decide I'm going to go and be class president and so forth, then I start into a process of leadership that is reinforced by the Boys' Club. The Boys' Club also nominates me to go to Boys' State, an American Legion project they have state by state, sort of a model state government. I go to Boys' State, learn a bit about state government, and so forth. It's politically oriented, so I run for office. I become "lieutenant governor of the state of California." By the way, one of the nice experiences from that is that you actually work with the real lieutenant governor for a day. One of the things the lieutenant governor had to do in that particular period was handle transfers of state funds. So I wound up with \$465 million in my hands.

That was a great experience. Then the Boys' Club also got me involved in a region-wide kind of student council called the San Gabriel Valley Youth Council, which was just being organized. So we came in on the ground floor. We got called together and were asked, "Wouldn't it be a good idea to have youth coming from various parts of the area in southern California?" I wound up the president of it and largely a designer of it.

But all of that is leading me in a direction towards public affairs, issues of policy, things of this sort. It's just kind of a natural evolution then, as I back away from the medical orientation, that public affairs and government emerge. Now the international part of it comes in essentially by the experience of going to a model UN. This is pretty

much in the same period. I had already had the Boys' State experience and now you have the model UN and it puts an international flavor to the scene, a sort of modeling process. It was great fun. So I'm really sort of international affairs-oriented by the time I transfer from this junior college to UCLA.

Now, UCLA itself, it's a mind-boggling experience—academically, I mean, I had to start over. Politically, I had no notion of what had been going on. The University of California system had been in turmoil around anti-communism in the McCarthyite period. There had been a lot of activity on campus that I hadn't heard about. When I got there, things were in a shambles, so to speak. They had shut down student government because the dean of students had orchestrated the impeachment of the student body president and a whole bunch of stuff. They closed the student newspaper.

Now, in the midst of all of this, I fall in with some guys who talked about starting a chapter of the NAACP, a youth chapter, especially when we find out there are no dormitories. You had a cooperative house for women and a much larger cooperative dorm kind of house that men lived in, maybe two hundred students. Other than that, you had fraternities and sororities, all of which were racially exclusive. So, as a black person coming on the campus, if you couldn't get into the cooperative housing, you probably couldn't live on campus. That was part of our issue—the exclusionary process within the fraternities and sororities, and yet they had been sort of licensed by the university and had this special affiliation.

So we organized around that. But unbeknownst to me, that was only part of the general picture of agitation on campus around issues of social change. All of this is happening in the context of a world changing. So I step into this and probably some guys see me come in and I'm ready, so they say, "Okay, you should be publicity secretary." They were trying to figure out, "Okay, let's make a statement to the press." They were going round and round, so I sat down and wrote out the complete statement while they were still discussing. I said, "What about this?" "Oh, that's good, okay." So I become publicity secretary for the chapter. Well, one thing leads to another and we get stomped on by the university. Everybody else connected with this is just disgusted, saying,

“This is ridiculous, absolutely, to suppress a chapter of the NAACP.” There were charges that we were communist agitators—the *NAACP!* It was incredible.

It was in connection with the effort to resist the suppression of the NAACP youth chapter that I first met Vivian. I went to her because she was on the student council. I tried to get her to back our efforts, and she was sort of reticent—not about the issue, but the manner in which I approached her. I came into her office saying something like, “Now what you should do is...” Her response was essentially, “Say what?”

*“Who do you think you are?”*

Exactly. Anyway, the long and short of all of that is, after a whole lot of permutations of it and so forth, lots of ins and outs, I decided I’m going to run for student body president. I ran on a whole stack of issues connected with this sort of thing, recognizing that student life is part of real life, and these issues of social change in the society and in the world are relevant to us and we’re being suppressed essentially for bringing those kinds of concerns onto the campus. The accusation is, “You wouldn’t do that if you weren’t communist. You’re just an agitator, you’re being used by these larger forces.” It’s right here in front of us. So I wind up being student body president.

*It took nerve to do that.*

Well, it took foolishness in a certain sense. I didn’t really sit back and think about what the consequences were, what the dangers were. All of these experiences had naturally led me to see what you can do. I’m saying to myself, “Of course you can do it.” Not just me, I mean, “This can be done—this ought to be done, this isn’t right—if we just organize this way, we can do something about it,” then we do it. You would naturally come to that. So in a certain sense, the blessing in all of it is the lack of self-censorship. If you hadn’t had all that and it was much more kind of calculated caution, you might not try. I see all that as very positive, but kind of a natural lock-step thing. It’s almost as if it would have taken a different kind of person not to do those things.

*I want to hear a little bit more about Vivian, because I did not realize that you had met, as you said, earlier.*

I should be technically correct. I actually first met her—was introduced to her on the campus—walk-

ing across the campus and being told she was the women’s rep on the student council and being impressed with that. Then once we got into all this turmoil, I naturally would go to her—as a black person, because it’s not a women’s rep issue to raise that. That wasn’t the best foot forward. But once I ran for student body president and won, things changed. I mean, the campus was in turmoil and that emerges out of all of that as something of an answer. Somebody would say that’s pretty arrogant. I actually had a little campaign slogan, saying “Answer with an ideal.” Well, that’s a clever double entendre. “You’re saying you are the ideal candidate?” “Well, yes, and I also have an ideal about this.” It’s an idealistic campaign, in other words.

Anyway, Vivian interacted with the campaign. But then, at about that time, several things were happening in the world, one of which was the Bandung Conference in Indonesia among the ex-colonial states. I decided that we should have a get-together among the students on campus who represented that emerging ex-colonial world. A lot of them were concentrated in my cooperative housing unit because they also couldn’t get into the fraternities and sororities. So it was a cauldron, so to speak, of the international students, which was a blessing. We had this student Bandung conference on campus, which I organized. It turns out that Vivian helped me do that. We organized various functions to pull the resources together. I’m student body president-elect, I’m not yet really in office. She’s still in office and she’s using some of her student council connections and so forth, and we pulled it off. In the course of working together on that, I guess she got a better idea of me. And she was impressive to me from the start, in every way. We got engaged in my senior year and we got married a few months later.

*When you mention UCLA, what other things strike you when you move from UCLA to your next stage in life? Basically, do you recall how many student body presidents had been black before you?*

One.

*Was that Rayford Johnson?*

No, Rayford came after me. First there was Sherrill Luke, who subsequently became city manager for the city of Richmond, California. We knew him only by reputation. He was a legend. He had gone on into serious government life, but he never had any image of being a rabble-rouser or anything of

that sort. He was just a black who had done this sort of thing.

Truthfully, I'm sure that there was a certain element of the race factor—positive probably—in my candidacy, but in the context of all that had been happening, there were two things that made it distinctive. One was that we put forward a kind of real-world platform and I ran a really active campaign. First of all, I decided we would have a whole slate of people working as a group. We had a platform for that group, so we were among the first student government candidates to run as a political party. That was the serious part. But the platform included the objective of reorganizing the structure of student government. That's the "Play-Doh" aspect of it.

I'd just come out of two similar experiences. There was this youth council thing where the focus was to "write a constitution." Then my high school itself had been reorganized and the two junior colleges in our city had been merged. There were two junior colleges in town which merged together, and I was on the committee to work out certain constitutional features of that. So as the student body president-elect at UCLA, I also focused on constitutional aspects of it, which was really kind of ridiculous, but behind all of that we did have a larger conception of student government. My notion was that we ought to be fully involved in the governance of the university—that is to say, in the educational mission of the university. Students are in society and all of the issues of society are a part of their life. Students are responsible and should share the responsibility for their education.

So in order to get around the social and therefore the fraternity/sorority orientation of student government, I said that our representatives ought to come to student council from an academic framework. Therefore, we ought not have a representative for the fraternities, sororities, and the men and the women, but rather they should be elected from constituencies based on the School of Engineering, School of Social Science, so forth and so on.

#### *Part of the Institute?*

Well, in the sense that they would be academically oriented and they would bring therefore their interest from that perspective into student council life and that might also emphasize the more real-world, the non-social aspects. Student government typically was social.

So this campaign kind of made people think a little bit. In the context of four or five years of turmoil on campus around issues of public policy, this all had started because students on campus—mostly radical Jewish elements—had refused to go into the ROTC. ROTC was a requirement. In the ROTC you were required to wear a uniform and carry a gun. And they refused to do that. They said, "First of all, we shouldn't even be required to be in ROTC, but if we're in ROTC, we should not be required to carry a gun." So that's how it started and within three or four years, it led to total suppression of all student government.

#### *Tough issues.*

Yes, they were big issues. They were even bigger at Berkeley, but we didn't know that. So in that context, you could say that these little steps that we were involved in led to bigger issues in ways that I couldn't perceive. That didn't stop me from naturally going ahead, but it did undermine my grade-point average.

*Did the work itself in your student government have a lot to do with it?*

Oh, yes. I spent a lot of time on this stuff. My grades were like B's, B+'s. They could have been A's if that's all I did. But that never would have been all I did.

*That's never been your forte, based on what you've said so far.*

That's right.

*This is around 1957. What happened to you and Vivian after 1957?*

Well, the first thing I did as student body president was to go to the U.S. National Student Association conference. At those conferences, I found out about an international student seminar that USNSA used to run at Harvard. So I applied for and went to that seminar. In the course of that seminar, little did I know, all of the entourage at the time looked me over. I emerged as their top person in the seminar. So the leadership of the organization asked me to run for office. The seminar was also a recruitment and training for the officers of the organization. So I ran for office and I got elected to be educational vice president. Then I was able to concoct a national program built around the things we had tried to do at UCLA. We called it the "student responsibility in higher education project." I applied for and got

money from Ford Foundation to do this, and did it for a year. Halfway through that year, Vivian and I got married and settled in Philadelphia, which is where our headquarters were.

I did that for a year and it came off fine. In this seminar, one of the issues had been how should the U.S. relate to the international peace festivals that used to be held that were sponsored by the Soviets, essentially. It was the Soviets' recruiting mechanism to get connections with youth organizations around the world. I had written this little memorandum, just as an exercise in the seminar, about how one could approach this. Little did I know that I had reinvented the wheel, so to speak. They were already thinking how to create this little information service and try to get people to go on the U.S. delegation, but then have their own really knowledgeable people in this delegation. It turns out that all of that stuff was CIA-funded and so forth. They recruited Gloria Steinem to run it. They actually did that, while I'm doing this stuff in Philadelphia, the educational stuff. It looks like my memorandum is being implemented, but it wasn't really based on my memorandum.

That then led to the issue of my taking an interest in the international side of it. Then various problems that I didn't know about within the organization posed the dangers of a maverick emerging in the international vice-presidency, and they thought it was going to be a disaster. One candidate was a good friend, actually, but they thought, "This guy, if he wound up being elected, it would be terrible," so I should run. I could sort of see what they had in mind: he just would have been a bumbling figure politically. That's why I thought I needed to run.

That got me on the international circuit, so I did a second year. But what I really wanted to do was go to the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies. I had been admitted, but I had postponed it for a year. That's when I first came to Cambridge. I found out a whole bunch of other things. Then I went through a tumultuous year, did my stint. My contribution with respect to the deep structure of all that was to say, "Oh man, this country is in serious trouble. So many of its institutions are supported in ways that people don't know." So I insisted that we consolidate our offices. The international office had been up here in Cambridge and the national office was back in

Philadelphia. That allowed for easier external manipulation. I'm set to bring the international office back to Philadelphia. Various and sundry pressures were put on me not to do this, but it fell short of a full revelation of all that this would really mean. A few years later this led to public revelation of CIA backing for nearly all of American international programs. But, I could sense the need for this consolidation to buffer if not break this external manipulation. So I did it, but then I wanted no more to do with this organization. I took my fellowship, went to Johns Hopkins, and did my studies in African affairs.

That also had altered my idea of going into government service. I initially had been oriented to the foreign service, but there was the combination of the NSA experience and then the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. The school used a lot of government people as adjunct teachers and you got an exposure to the way in which things work in the government—the subordination, the hierarchy, the years of mid-level bureaucratic stuff before you have any real chance to work on policy. All that made me decide there that it was an academic career and not a government career that I wanted. I've already gone through a certain amount of being elected to things and being in the company of people who were elected to things and being among leaders and shakers, so I'm really not mesmerized by that. This is good. It made me see academia as a more natural world.

*What caused you to focus on Africa?*

That's because of my mentor at UCLA. It was a very pregnant time. Think back, the 1950s. I'm very opened up by the emergence of Ghana, the Bandung conferences, as I mentioned. They were really electrifying experiences for me. It was the colored world taking charge, you know. There was Nasser. That kind of focused all the attention on this new world emerging over the old world. Now, it doesn't take any genius at all to see that that's all of a piece, and that this country is going to change. It's got to change; the world is changing. And those events are all resources, so you get with those resources, and I could see that Africa, or at least the third world—let's say the ex-colonial, the decolonized world, really, is what it was—is attractive because of that.

Now, within that, what I found appealing was the Middle East—Nasser. Then I had classmates

and housemates who were Muslim and from that world. I take up Arabic studies and I do Middle Eastern studies as well. But you know, as I would talk with my professor, James Coleman, who was an Africanist, he would say, "Well, why aren't you interested in Africa?" I said, "Well, I am." And then he sort of got the notion, I think, "You're really coming at this through the back door, so to speak. You're really interested in black Africa, but somehow or another you don't want to just get ahold of black Africa." So we talked about that a little bit, a kind of revelation that I really did have these kinds of deep barriers, so to speak, to grasping Africa. I knew it was critically important that the decolonizing process happen in the U.S., that we come to see the black and Africa part of that as positive and everything was happening to make it so. Seize on that, push that, and that would be our kind of crowbar within the American political system.

*You mentioned James Coleman. Is that the James Coleman?*

Well, there were two James Colemans. It's the James Coleman in the field of African studies, but there was also a sociologist James Coleman, who was very, very well known. That's probably the one you're thinking of. He did a lot of educational studies.

It was Coleman who really shows me, first demonstrating in his own life and then by saying, "You can make a satisfying career out of African studies, you can do it." He really orients me by the time I go to the School of Advanced International Studies.

*What's remarkable up to this point is the amount of experiences you're bringing up.*

Well, that's why I say really the remarkable thing would be not to do these things. In a certain sense, I moved along, I'm going with the flow, I'm a little bit more attuned to historical things, but not really consciously, you know what I'm saying? It's not that I'm sitting down as a philosopher or an analyst or something of this sort figuring all of this out. It's almost an instinctual, emotional thing. The world is turned upside down by a colored man who looks pretty dark and actually looks a lot like my uncle, so I can identify even physically with this person as one of us. He takes hold of the Suez Canal. Britain and France suddenly are turned upside down, and then he succeeds. Then you've got improvement. And then you've got Sukharno.

Of course, Gandhi had already made his impact. You've got Nehru on the scene, and so forth.

There was no question, although that's the very period of the Beat generation, the mid-1950s. For white people, it was a totally dead, defunct, uninvolved kind of thing. This was when they were at their silliest. You know, Rome was burning. But for somebody coming along with an international interest or public affairs or government interest and actually knowing people from those worlds, sitting and talking to them, that's what it was all about.

This is one of the reasons why I'm convinced about MIT's great deficiency. We make up for it in part because we have so many international students. We do bring in the world here. For undergraduates, certainly for graduates, with one-third of the student body being international, there's every chance to have a diverse set of friends and so forth. We're among the higher proportions among universities for undergraduates too, so I think that's less and less the problem. It's just that even when the international students come here they lack diversity of interests.

Anyway, I learned at Johns Hopkins that I did not want to go into the U.S. Foreign Service because we had all these faculty from government there. The reorientation towards an academic career came slowly. This mentor of mine at UCLA had gotten me to look at Africa, but then, within that, I was still thinking in terms of the Foreign Service, government, policymaking sort of thing. To take it as an academic orientation could wait, and in some ways I haven't gotten there yet. I really haven't taken very seriously, I must say, the issue of engaging the sort of theoretical literature, as such, as a very important dimension to the scholarly work. So often I think people who do that are really sort of just filling gaps that need not be filled sometimes. They orient their work towards either whatever has been talked about among the theoreticians—sometimes with good reason and sometimes not, but in the social sciences we have much less clear tests of applicability and importance and so on. It's much more amenable to sociological factors, not even excluding ethnic ones, for you constantly to be dominated by the theoretical discourse and not attend to problems that confront real people, problems that are priorities for any conscientious person of color, anybody who comes from a victimized group.

But that's just to say that the academic world in that sense can be ivory-tower or disconnected and so marginal. My reluctance to embrace it thoroughly had to do with the sense that I'm more interested in applied work. That means you gain from it primarily because you may make a contribution to real life. But then on the cost side, the profession as such, especially for top-ranked research-oriented universities, this approach makes you invisible in the sense that you are not just second-class, but third or fourth. In other words, the notion that you haven't contributed to the theoretical material of your profession means you're not considered to be first-rate among the leaders of your profession. If the department isn't going to have people who are visible and powers, of course, the department would go down.

So that pressure is there. I have to some extent resisted it. But also I must say I do not feel a lot of internal pressure on me to do it, because if I had done it, they wouldn't have taken me seriously. After a while, you just learn where to put your energies.

*You sound like you made a choice in your mind as to where you were going to put your energy. It may not have necessarily been where most people would think that one should put one's energy in, say, the area of political science. I know a lot of things you've done that don't go down in the record as being scientific, but they have been very significant. We'll talk some about them later. I just think that's a very important point for a scholar, particularly an African-American scholar—a young scholar—to hear what you're saying. I think I understand what you're saying. You have to make a choice about how you're going to give your life and what kind of things are going to make you feel like you're doing something worthwhile.*

If you don't have some sort of internal guidance system about that, you can easily be turned off. Now that's not to say that theory isn't important. It can be. My approach to the theory side of it, and therefore that really crucial area of professional development and work, would be to say that you should create your theoretical tools in response to the problems you're working on. I've tried to craft some theoretical instruments for my own use, but I haven't sought to contribute to the theory per se. I'm then suspicious of people, especially young people, who set out to do that. I don't think they've grappled enough with the real problems

that are out there to be solved. But some people are just gifted and they come along and they have that creative kind of conceptual insight, and maybe they do make a real contribution.

We have a young guy now, Chinese, in our department. He's just fabulous. He thinks about the biggest questions there are. I'm astounded at times that he's struggling with these things. I have to admit that he locks on to certain key insights and uses them well and so forth, and if any young person is going to create a new way of analyzing, he's going to do it. Be grateful for people concerned with these things.

But I'm just saying there's a lot of pressure on you at a place like MIT to fit that mold. It's part of the prestige of the place and it's certainly a key element to the real science that goes on here. In political science, which at times places one on the margins, you want to think more scientifically about things as a kind of orientation. I accept that. I try to grow into that. But I do think at MIT we've had both the down and the up side of this because the combination of science and engineering poses those same issues. We have people with an applied sense—"You tell me what it is and I'll build it." There is an appreciation for applied work at MIT. I do sense often that there are pure scientists here who have an appreciation for the capacity to figure out what use something is and how to make the connections. So in that sense there has been at least a willingness to put up with the likes of me, in that sense—not just the little black boy from Alabama me, but the person constantly concerned about engaging problems of society and things of this sort, and doing a certain amount of work that really is extracurricular from a certain point of view, although it enriches the classroom. Often it does not feed much into research, but it reflects the notion of "we're working with real problems," and that becomes a kind of anchor or reality check even for those around you who maybe went off with this or that point of view.

We just had an example like that, I think, in my department this week—a rather serious, knockdown kind of intellectual debate on the most fundamental thing: hiring a tenured person. My argument was essentially that people have been rather highly touted for their methodological skills and contributions and that's essentially a kind of formalistic and superficial approach. They were arranging what's already known, as an approach,

and they weren't really creating an approach that excelled as a tool, that cuts through obscurities and enlightens and opens up things.

The good thing you could say about folks like myself is that they nonetheless are working with real people, movements and so forth. But since we had been led to put the emphasis in our discussion on just the methodological edge to this, that's when we are found wanting. I think you may remember the case of James Carter, the pediatrician and nutritionist from New Orleans. Here's a physician who has done original research in nutrition up here. Scrimshaw brought him in. He didn't get the offer. I was so shocked: I said, "Man, if this guy can't get hired, who the hell can you hire?"

So then I did my own little study. "What is this?" I asked. I went and interviewed all these people. I must admit, everybody responded and they gave me an interview. On the one hand, you've got Nevin Scrimshaw over here involved in everything, active in all these committees, and so on, and really out there in terms of his knowledge and contact with people. On the other side, you have Hamish Munro, who's writing article after article after article on how the body metabolizes vitamin A or B or whatever—not even our bodies, but rats and by analogy and so forth. And he said, "This man hasn't done any work." I said, "Well, he's got eighteen or twenty articles here." He said, "Well, I've got four hundred."

There was a disparity there, but in the end what I thought it came down to was a laboratory-pure-science kind of person versus, in the field, a how-does-it-impact-on-people kind of person—and how crucial it was for MIT to have both. In that particular case, it might not be so obvious how each should feed back on each other. In theory, what's learned in the laboratory and what it means to people out there could be clear, but the reverse direction is also important but maybe less clear. You say, which problems do you choose to work on? Well, you know, black people are different from white people with respect to high blood pressure, kidney disease, and so forth. Well, let's finally look at that set of problems. That happens because you've got people out there working with real communities who nonetheless have some connection back in the laboratory and start impacting on the way in which people think about which problems are important.

A great university like MIT needs to have both of those things. But we somehow or another didn't have room for a James Carter because he had twenty instead of four hundred publications. But his twenty publications are just fine in and of themselves, and he can also tell you what the nutritional vulnerabilities are for people in various circumstances and do something about it. So Munro said, "Well, what contributions has he made? I don't see the contribution." I said, "Well, let's look at his work with the Apaches or whoever it was." He said, "Oh well, yes, but where's the science in that? Where's the contribution in that?" I said, "Do you think maybe the Apaches were benefiting?" And then he stopped when he realized how ridiculous the thing was. "Well, yes," he said, "I imagine they may have gotten a lot of benefit out of his work with them." But you know, Munro was thinking of himself as working for all of mankind by solving these neat problems, and this guy was just saving the Apaches.

*It's a very important point to make. Go back to the time when you were at Johns Hopkins and then leaving Johns Hopkins and going to, I think, Harvard. Could you talk a little bit about your choice to go from Johns Hopkins to Harvard and your experiences from that school to this school?*

Well, Johns Hopkins was a good experience. It was a high-quality education. It was in Washington, so I don't regret that at all. It took two years to do a master's, but as I said, I went there thinking I might come out of there into the U.S. Foreign Service. In the course of time, I became more academically oriented, or at least I felt that I could more likely wind up doing both, that is to say, intellectually getting a grip on things and having some powerful impact, more through academe than by going into government service.

So then the issue is, "You're going to go on—well, where?" I had been to this summer institute at Harvard, so I had a little familiarity with Harvard. But I have to admit that when I first got the invitation to come to the seminar, Harvard was just a name. In my family, we knew the name Harvard, but we had no idea really. My family wasn't oriented to discuss issues of the best universities and things of this sort. My father, as I say, had gone to the University of Chicago. He must have known that that was "up there," but it might have been so far up there for a guy from Kansas that he

didn't look beyond that. So there wasn't any discussion. If they didn't have a football team or a basketball team that would be in the news, my more general community wouldn't have known about them. So I didn't know about Princeton. Yale and Harvard you heard about. That exposure of being able to have been for a summer at this international institute was important in that regard. I knew people there.

Then there was the university from which I had come, UCLA, and I also knew Berkeley, as I said. Berkeley was the epitome—or the acme, I should say—and I would have certainly gone there somehow or another if anybody had intervened and said, "Here's a fellowship, come." But that didn't happen. What happened was that my mentor at UCLA said, "Here's a fellowship, come to UCLA for your Ph.D." I wasn't so impressed with that, having been there already and more or less taking it for granted.

Now, the issue for Harvard financially didn't loom so large in my mind because, again, I already had a big fellowship. I had one of these foreign area training fellowships that will cover you four years. I spent two of them at Johns Hopkins and in my mind the other two were going to carry me through.

*You could do what you wanted with it.*

Oh, man, I just didn't think about it. I applied to Harvard. I had straight A's at Johns Hopkins. I did not have straight A's at UCLA, but when I got into graduate school, I had all A's. You have to apply before you finish the exams, so they didn't know when they considered the application the first time through that I had done so well and, more importantly, that I had gotten a distinction on the general exams.

But the thing that stuck in my mind was the rejection letter from Harvard. I'm saying, "Geez, I got straight A's at Johns Hopkins and I'm a little black boy from Alabama. What is this?" So I called up this guy I know in the government department and say, "I'm just flabbergasted. I would think they're going to give me money." He says, "Well, you've got straight A's?" I said, "Not only that, I just got a distinction on my exam. What does a guy have to do?" So he says, "Well, let me check into it." So he checks into it and he calls back a few days later. New information had come to their attention and, with their apologies, I was admitted into Harvard.

So then I focused on getting some money. They must have offered tuition because that was a hefty bill. I think they must have offered that, and then I think I went to the John Hay Whitney Foundation Opportunity Fellowships. I was dealing with all kinds of jobs. I made it through, and I saved my other two years of my Foreign Area Training Fellowship for the field work. Now I'm into Harvard, I was surely going to go there after all of that. Like I said, if Berkeley had called up and said, "We have a fellowship, come," I would have gone. But Harvard in effect calls up and says, no, you can't come and I say, "*What? What is this place?*" But not having any money and always having my back up a little bit, I was intent on going there.

I also knew exactly what I wanted to work on. Cameroon unification had emerged as an issue while I was at Johns Hopkins, so I was really focused. When I got to Harvard, I spent one academic year and a summer and did all the main coursework. I had already done a two-year master's. I negotiated with them to give me credit for one term of residency at Harvard for the two-year residency at Johns Hopkins. So you strip that to one and a half years. In that final term, the third term I'm there, I really wasn't there. I took reading courses, I took the exams. As soon as I was done with the exams, language, qualifying, and so forth, I went full-blooded into my dissertation work. I left really before that term was over and headed out to the field. But they counted it as residency because I had done the work. I did a little over a year in the field, came back and looked around for a job.

*When you say the field, what does that mean?*

I went to Cameroon to do research.

*You stayed there for how long?*

A little over a year, not all of it in Cameroon. I stopped in England and Paris on the way, did interviews in Ghana and other places on the way back. I was back here by January of 1964. I set out to write and quickly realized the only way this was going to be finished was to use the adage which is now famous among my family and among my students—"the only good dissertation is a done dissertation." So I set out to try to get four usable pages a day. If I could hit five, fine, but I would not quit until I had four—every day. And I was able to submit a draft at the end of that June, get feedback,

and get it signed off by August. When I stepped into the classroom here in September, it was an accepted dissertation and I came as an assistant professor.

*One other point before you leave Harvard and your experience there. Were there any influential people anywhere similar to your mentor at UCLA?*

Well, yes and no. Rupert Emerson was the person who supervised African studies at Harvard. He was a very noble man, prince of a man, extremely fair-minded, very smart, patrician in a way, but there was no bleeding-heart sympathy in his approach. It had to do with nationalism sweeping the world. He wasn't opposed. That didn't scare him, so in that sense he was a nurturing, good, positive role model. In fact, he hired Vivian to do work for him. So we felt very good about that relationship. While I wouldn't say it was close, we were friendly and there was no tension in it at all.

I probably should have thought more about hierarchy and people over you and that they can say no and where would you be, and so forth. I really didn't think much about that at all because of the intellectual problem I was working on relating to how to achieve African unity. I thought, "Try to solve it, move ahead." It also went by like a blur. Like I said, I had no money. By the time I'm writing this dissertation, I've got two children. Life is serious.

*No time to waste, right? So you came here. You came to MIT as an assistant professor. Could you talk a little bit about how you got here, given the fact that there's nobody really like you here in that position?*

Ron McLaughlin was the only other black faculty at MIT at the time, but I didn't really know that. It was a fluke in that sense. I still was oriented to Berkeley in my mind. I was focused on writing my dissertation and getting out of there. Along about April or so, even on into May, I realized this is going to happen. I've hit my stride, I'm writing and it's flowing, and I can think about being on the job market. I went over and looked around on the board at the department for job listings and so forth, but I did not have sense enough to go and demand to see the placement officer, or even know that there would be a placement officer for the department. It did not occur to me that there was somebody in the department whose job it was to help you find a job. I was just disconnected. Rupert Emerson didn't say, "There's this job,

there's that job, and now you should get in the queue and do this that and the other." I was focusing on getting this dissertation done. I didn't hang around the department. I wrote at home. I wrote from before sunrise until the hours of the night every day for about six months. So I really didn't think a whole lot about job-hunting.

I tell this as a funny story about myself, but it's kind of pathetic. I thought I'd get a job at Berkeley because I was deserving enough to get a job at Berkeley. But Vivian in her nice calm self said, "Well, did you apply?" I said, "What do you mean, apply?" I thought Harvard would send out announcements about who's on their list of students now finishing their Ph.D. and so forth, and then you would get this offer. Then it dawned on me, not only did I not apply, but it's pretty late in the game, actually. So I could send a letter. I didn't really know anybody at Berkeley. I had better fill in, I had better scurry a little bit, take care of my family. So I thought, "Well, okay, what I'll do is I will go around to each university in the Boston area and offer to teach a course." If I had to, I could teach the same course five times, maybe, or two courses or something of this sort. I put together a whole program.

I vaguely knew about MIT having a political science department through one of the students in my group that I had led with Crossroads Africa in the summer immediately after my Johns Hopkins stint—I led a team of students to the Republic of Guinea under Operation Crossroads Africa. That was a tremendous experience and that's a whole other story, but one of the students in that group was a physicist whose life was just turned around by the experience. He was so profoundly affected by that experience that he decided to change fields. When he came back, he became a student in the political science department at MIT on the basis of his super mathematical skills, scientific training and so on. He was that kind of person. He had this experience with African development and so forth, and he became a political scientist. He got his degree from MIT and went into teaching, although not at a big advanced research-oriented university. He may even have switched as an undergraduate and taken his undergraduate degree from MIT and maybe a master's somewhere else.

So while I am finishing my doctorate at Harvard, he let me know a certain amount about the political science department at MIT. Then I

looked up who was in it. Dan Lerner was one of the people, he was chairman. He had written books that I knew about. Rupert Emerson could tell me a little bit about the others, but fundamentally it was Lerner. So I just walked down there and knocked on his door and said, "I'm just finishing up or I will be finished and I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of teaching a course in the department." Now, I had been smart enough at least to run to the library and get the man's other books and be able to talk to him a little bit about his own work. But if anybody else had been "on seat" that day, as they say, if he hadn't been in and somebody else had stayed in his place, it would have been over.

Well, it so happens that one of the Sloan family—I don't know if it's Alfred Sloan or not, but I think it was one of the daughters or nieces or something, perhaps a woman named Ruth Sloan, who is an Africanist in Washington, DC—that family had made a gift to the department without designation for a chair that probably was in the donors' minds meant to promote African studies at MIT. The department had used it to hire a series of visiting people. They had already contracted to have a visitor come in with that money who backed out at the last minute. So in fact, they were looking for somebody. They weren't on the market, but they were suddenly caught short. I didn't know this. I didn't realize they actually needed a Godsend. So they checked me out, I'm sure. No one ever told me about the kind of checks they did and who they talked to. I didn't have to give a job talk, but I did show my work.

You got into this story much later, because I pointed out at a certain point when you were helping me, that this nice Dan Lerner—super-liberal and all this—hired me at the lowest incoming salary in the whole Institute at that point. Here they had all this extra money; but I just didn't know better. I was happy to get the job. It was only later that I found out that I was below the charts in terms of starting salary. Bob Wood corrected that, but even so, having started late and trying to catch up meant that for years you had a pattern of disparity which I don't think has ever been closed, much less corrected. So I can't say that it's an unmixing blessing to have been here. I can say that I had my reasons for knocking on the door. I was happy that they opened it and it's been a happy fight ever since.

*When you actually came in, they hired you full-time?*  
That's right. I had come and asked for one class. Initially they said, "Well, yes, but we're not interested in one course. Are you willing to work full-time?" "Well, of course, yes." But I only wanted to do it for a year because I was waiting for my offer to come from Berkeley. So I just signed a one-year contract.

*Do you remember that first year or two, particularly the first year? What did you take off on, I mean, knowing there's a pattern to your approach?*

No, no. I had to now think about turning the dissertation into a book and I was struggling putting together courses. It was a full teaching load. I didn't have any time off from that. There wasn't anything activist in the scene at that point. I was raising money still for SNCC and stuff like that. They're sort of on the downside, over that hump by this time, but the assassinations and things of this sort were on the horizon.

Once I got sort of set, the department gave me money to go back to Cameroon and do some more stuff. It was fun. I got plenty of support in everything, lots of tolerance. The big issue was, since I had a one-year contract, changing it from a one-year to regular. Now, that was really Bob Wood's doing.

*Is this the same Bob Wood who is at Wesleyan now?*

Yes. Bob Wood took over as chair from Dan Lerner right at that point. Bob Wood calls me in and says, "You have a fine preparation, background, and so forth, and we actually do need somebody. Why don't you think about going into a regular, three-year cycle?" In order for me to do that, he then told me what I would have to do. "One of the things you have to do is you have to become known to all of the faculty, so you should systematically have lunch with each and every one of them. They get a chance to know who you are, what you're doing."

So I did that. We had various activities going on that people would talk about. So it wasn't a job talk, but you had a chance to demonstrate your interest and capabilities. I had very good feedback on student evaluations and it was just a good trajectory. As it turns out actually, a one-year cycle where right away you start thinking about extending it, that's a big hurdle, but it's also an easy hurdle in a certain sense. It would have been harder if it had been two years, because they would have

more time to think about it, you would have gone through more hoops. But it's almost immediately, you're going to hire this person or not on a regular basis.

That turned into a three-year contract, and that really is Bob Wood's doing. As soon as I had the dissertation accepted by Princeton University Press, top press in social sciences, I was sort of home free in that regard. I didn't realize how long it would take them to actually get the book out. The book came out in 1970, they accepted it in 1967. One of those years there were certain revisions and the index and so forth. It took them almost a year to accept it. I guess I gave it to them in early '67. I didn't hear until the end of '67 and then had some slight revisions to do and so forth. But by '68, I figured I'd got my book, I've done a certain amount of work, I had several chapters in books by then. And all hell was breaking loose in the country, so I put in for a leave.

*This is around 1968.*

'Sixty-eight, yes. I had joined with Mel King and Hubie Jones and a number of other people to create this thing called Circle. That was already under way and, now that I've gotten my academic stuff all organized, I'm really drawn now into the exploding scene here—not only around the U.S. but in the world. I mean, it was a tough time. I felt the tension all the way through. For me, the problem always had been—here I am off doing a study of Cameroon. In fact, I remember having a discussion with the U.S. ambassador—white, from Kansas actually—in which I said that I shouldn't even be here, I should be home. And he's trying to say, "No, it's important to do something longer-term." That's another story.

So that's when I took the leave, a two-year leave. I'm now up for renewal. I've gone through most of the three-year cycle. The key thing is that I've got the book in the press, I've got some chapters, et cetera. They're coming up to renew; they renew. I worked full-time to create Circle off-campus—in town, but off-campus. In the course of that, towards the end of that, I would come up for a tenure decision. And it's Bob Wood again who takes up the tenure case. They had three slots and three rights activist-oriented junior scholars—myself in the black community, a guy named Leonard Fine in the Jewish community, and the only liberal Republican in the country, who had

started something called The Ripon Society, a liberal youth group. We were all scholars, but we were all activist scholars—highly visible people, and so on. We were all up for tenure at the same time. We thought we had three slots, but the provost said, "You have one."

So now it was, who was it going to be? Each of these guys was in some ways from an out group. Of course, the Jewish guy was the least out group in that sense because they're mostly Jews who are making this decision. Anyway, it took them eighteen months to resolve this thing. Bob Wood had to come back time and time and time again. Somebody would say, "Well, his teaching isn't good." He'd say, "Well, wait a minute, let's go back to the record and look at it." Then they'd lay out the evaluations and say, "Well, actually, the only one here who's got stellar marks is Willard, not the other two. They're all good, but Willard's super," and so on.

So I credit Bob Wood for really being willing to go to bat. He couldn't have done it by himself, but the point is that it took that extra commitment to really honcho this thing through. Now I'm naively off creating an urban development company and not even around to find out what I should submit or not submit and so forth. Then they asked me, "Well, give us a list of names of people we can write to, to get the letters of recommendation." I put a bunch of Africanists down, but then I include the president of Cameroon, Amadou Ahidjo. What a dumb thing to do. But I felt that social science scholars should be accountable to the objects of their research. They fortunately didn't write to him, and if they had, I don't know what the man would have said. But, you see, God looks after you. Some people walk around with a little cloud over their head, others have sunshine wherever they go. So I felt blessed in all that. That could have turned out a whole lot different. There were some good people along the way.

The general issue had to do with whether at MIT there was an appropriate appreciation for the applied work. My research agenda was pretty clear and not unusual. I had a dissertation on a case study in Africa of political union—political integration. I had taken a unification movement and, to turn that into a book, I needed to put that movement into context and to deal with it in a broader frame, which I did do and I got some support from MIT to do it. I had time off—well,

a little bit of time off—and money to go back and do some more field interviews and stuff for a summer. So my trajectory initially, I think, was not at all unusual—with the exception, as I mentioned to you on more than one occasion and you had cause to champion me, that I had come in at an artificially low level because of Dan Lerner getting away with that stuff. I was naïve; what did I know?

But all I'm saying is that, in addition to the salary level, it was an unusual entry to MIT initially in that I took the initiative. They didn't come to me, I came to them. There was the business of Bob Wood taking me in hand and saying, "Look, if you want to stay longer than this one year, that's feasible. But for that to happen, to go into a regular three-year appointment renewable as you come up to the tenure decision, this is what you need to do." He told me what that was, which was essentially, "Get to be known by the other people in your department. Don't sit in your office, a recluse."

So I did. I went around, met everybody, made sure they knew what I was doing. That's unusual in that usually when we have a junior hire coming in, we've done a job search, they've come, they've done a presentation, and they come in with an appointment that is three-year or so and you expect it to be renewed if they're on track. At the end of the second one of those cycles, you would come up with some sort of promotion and judgments would start being made about whether you were likely to get tenure, and you might get an early warning at the associate level that you need to do stuff to get ready for tenure, et cetera.

So I'm coming in on a one-year initially, where nobody's thinking about this as a regular. But when I come up for renewal at the end of that year into the first of that normal cycle thing, I'm already here so there's no job talk and things of this sort. But from then on it's just, "What kind of research are you doing?" and "Do you know that you have to get your dissertation into a book and it needs to be a good book?" And I did all that. Having done all that, I then go deep into the applied work, in fact, in a somewhat different field. I say "somewhat" because I'm focusing on political integration in Africa, but I'm also increasingly focusing on development policies and institutions in general. So when I take a leave of absence here to go and set up and run Circle, that's really within

the same framework of the concept of development promotion. I use the African experience as a kind of model for that. I didn't see that as a very great change of orientation and so forth, but it was unusual in this sense—that the department did not have, nor did I, any real understanding about whether what I was doing at Circle would be a basis for renewal and tenure here.

It was foolish that I didn't think really much about that. As it turned out, most of what I did at Circle proved to be very attractive to the department because they were not really totally committed to the Africa side of things. Increasingly in that period of turmoil in America, they were concerned about ghetto development, inner-city politics, things of this sort. My new experience catered to that.

So when I was in the midst of that work, and now I'd been here five years, I took this leave. In the sixth year, issues about promotion come up. I have discussions with the department chairman. Now they're centered on, "Are you also willing to teach in the area of American urban politics?" "Yes, I am." When I actually come back from two years at Circle, I have a number of publications in hand, in fact, bearing on that.

Now, I say publications. These included a number of research reports. For example, one of them was a two-volume study of solid-waste management approaches in twelve cities across the U.S. That involved a consortium of research organizations and people. One of the people in that consortium was Donald Schon, one was Henry Jacoby, who is now at the Sloan School. So this was an academically framed kind of work, but we were doing it as consultants outside the framework of MIT. Circle was actually the prime contractor and they were sub-contractors, because we insisted politically that no one from outside the black community was going to work in the inner city and be in control of it. "We'll be prime, you'll be the sub-contractor," we said. Schon and Evelyn Murphy, who later became state secretary of environmental affairs or something—they had this organization called Technology Innovations or something like that—were sub-contractors. That's before Schon came to MIT. He came here after that as a Presidential Professor.

Anyway, when I come back, I've got that study. It's not all my study, but I'm the principal investigator. I'm the manager of that study. I also

have a number of studies focused on the Boston area for development planning. Circle had some consultancies around television programs aimed at dealing with race relations in inner-city affairs. WGBH had a series called “On Being Black,” for example. I did the evaluation of that series. So I had this stack of stuff, along with things I had done on the Africa side. I continued to write about Africa during that period, so I had three or four chapters in books. I had the Princeton University publication of my book, which was not just the dissertation. The dissertation fed into it. The dissertation was like two and a half, maybe three out of six or so chapters—a little less than half. So that was all major new work. I was asked would I be willing to split my time—urban politics, African politics. On the urban politics side, I then ran courses for several years around community and economic development. One I called “The Colonial Analogy,” which looked at the inner city as if it were a colony and the policies dealing with it as if they were colonial policies and the development process as a decolonization process.

*You were radical.*

No, I wasn't. I was just dealing with the realities. That was, I think, a good, popular course. I never really, though, published on this theme. I wrote a major paper called “The Colonial Analogy,” but never published it. Where I fell down—and I keep looking back on it and saying it's really a mistake, that I was really falling down—was not to work on getting good publishing outlets for the stuff I was writing. Quite frankly, looking back on it, half of what I had written never got published.

*I heard a lot of it was good stuff, too.*

Well, I thought so. It's just that I wasn't attuned enough. That's where mentoring, perhaps, in terms of the professional side of things, maybe a little bit better connections would have helped out. For example, I did a study for Abt Associates in the early days, one of my first consultancies. It was an analysis of Nigeria from the point of view of the kind of interethnic politics that was undermining the stability of that state. It provided a framework for understanding the first of their civil wars, coups leading into the Biafra War. That should have been published. It was an excellent paper. It needed polishing and so forth. I did the paper and gave it to Abt Associates, got my money, and that was the end of that.

Now if I had come from a different tradition, that would not have happened. In some cases, a lot of the stuff I did—for example, on South Africa—was done with the notion of kind of moving the political process. Some of it was published, but it was published in marginal publications. But here, again, from the professional point of view they're marginal; from my point of view, politically, they're not. They got to my audience. So Hoyt Fuller asked me to write something for what initially was *Negro Digest* and then became—what did they call it?—*First World* or something like that, or *Black World*. That had a good black intelligentsia audience, but it wasn't doing me any good whatsoever in terms of the profession. I wrote a series of things like that, testimony I did for Congress on why we needed to disconnect from South Africa. That's not unusual. There are any number of professors who will time and time again go and give testimony to Congress. I gave testimony. The difference is, I didn't polish it and publish it. I just presented it.

*Were you tenured at that time?*

Yes. I got tenured pretty early and maybe that's one of the reasons why I didn't publish all this material. When I came back from Circle with this stack of stuff, and an agreement, I really got tenure right then. The decision was made in '72.

*That was really early.*

Well, seven years. That's when it's supposed to be. I came here in '64, don't forget—especially taking two years in the process. I mean, I stay on track even though I've gone off. So I'm not really thinking in terms of, “I've got to get the publications into really top-notch professional journals.” My concern is, “I need to think it through, write it down, put it out there.”

*Where was Wood at that time?*

He probably had become head of Model Cities by the time of my case. He championed my tenure. I don't know, perhaps he was still chair of the department. You see, Dan Lerner was chair when I first came and then—my memory is a little hazy—it may be that there was a slight interim, but soon thereafter Bob Wood took over. Bob resigned to go and run the Model Cities program. But one of the last things before that happened was for him to proceed with my tenure case. He may even have continued on that after he left, because when I actually had the discussion with Ithiel de Sola

Pool—about whether I would teach urban politics as well—was after that. When I came back, I continued to do that, that split.

*Wood sounds like he was probably one of the closest persons whom you'd maybe call your mentor.*

Oh, absolutely. He's the one who is looking at this positively, in terms of taking steps to see what is actually needed. Everybody else is just there. I didn't perceive them as hostile, I didn't really perceive any hostility. I don't think there was any. But it wasn't as if anybody else really went out of their way to help me.

Initially, I don't think there was any hostility to my initial hiring, but there was certainly hostility to the notion of my getting tenure. Some of that was because—the best face you can put on that is—they had favorite candidates. You had Leonard Fine, who was an activist Jewish figure. I think they were closest to him, but then perhaps they were a little uneasy about the lack of diversity in the department and so didn't want to just go straight ahead with choosing him. But there was very strong support for him and he was good, there was no question about that. He was an activist also, which helped because you couldn't say, "Well, this is a choice between scholarship and activism." In fact, there were three candidates, and all three were combinations of activists and scholars. The third person was Jack Saloma, who was an activist as a liberal Republican. He had started the Ripon Society. He was prominent, and that served the department well. They were not all "radical Jewish leftists," as it were. We had this Republican who was leftist. Then we had this black who was leftist.

Then I just had to decide, did I want to and could I in fact keep these two different roles of Africa-oriented studies and urban American studies? Increasingly, each one is very demanding. To straddle them was difficult, so I pushed for us to actually hire somebody who knew something about black urban politics. The first such person was Lorenzo Morris and the second such person was Emma Jackson. I thought Lorenzo did a really good job. We didn't get very far with his promotion. I really went to bat when he came up for his promotion.

*Are you aware where he is now?*

Yes, he went to work at Howard University. He got an award the following year, so I sent around the award announcement.

*Rub it in, right?*

That wouldn't have changed anything. It just wasn't appreciated—in part for the subject, in part for the person. But, here we had somebody doing urban American politics, so I could then go back and do the African side.

*Before you go any further, talk a little bit about Circle. That was a major undertaking. And to understand, here is a young assistant professor going into the black community and orchestrating an organ that really worked in a very important way.*

I have this young student working on this case now. He was sort of floundering. So I posed to him a problem, which he is misinterpreting and treating as a failure rather than focusing in on the aspect of it that was the problem. The aspect that was the problem that I want him to flesh out and really grapple with is the mix of motives that it might take for an organization to serve the general community interest and at the same time satisfy enough individual interests of people for things to click. Circle didn't last for a very long period of time, and a lot of the businesses that it started failed and so forth, and he's saying, "Why did Circle fail?" I respond, "You can't say that. Look, man, we went from nothing to a staff of sixty people. We had six different operations going."

*And nothing like that has happened since.*

We did a lot—although I'm still intrigued by that aspect of the issue, because I don't think we solved it.

*That issue being?*

The mix of general, collective interests versus individual interests. We needed to find a way to commit people to the collective interest. One way to do that is ideology. Another way to do that is to build a context that would allow people to do the other things they want to do. They would use this mechanism to build up a framework and then they could make good on their own projects within that framework. That would be a mixture of the individual and the collective. One of the things that we were not prepared to do—we didn't have the means or the inclination—was just pay people to work for this, that is to say, use the attraction of very high salaries and pay the board members. We couldn't do it anyway. It was a non-profit corporation. We weren't willing to set it up as a profit-making operation. We were working not just on

commercial lines. The businesses we were funding and investing in were commercial, but we wanted the organization sponsoring all of that to belong to the community and be devoted to the community and not be mercenary within itself. We still confront the problem of how to motivate people to work on that kind of stuff.

That was a very telling experience, but that dimension of the experience I never really, until later, would have been able to grapple with intellectually and academically. I don't know if anyone has, and I don't know if I would want to now. I want to, from a memoir point of view, but from a professional point of view I think that we don't have very good work done on this except for the sort of theories that I've put this student to working with.

But that's another story. I'm just saying that there was a richness, a really profound richness to the issues, even just organizational theory issues that one might have made something out of. Rather than that, I dealt with it more as an approach to promoting economic development on the ground. I used it in my classes and I used it in my discussion on colonial-analogy writing. I think there was an appreciation in my department of both the service contribution and of the kind of urban-planning type of writing that I was able to bring out of it.

So I got tenure and once that was done, I continued to discuss the colonial analogy and use it as a planning tool for community development corporations. I did a joint seminar between MIT and Howard University. I went down there one day a week, and at the end I brought that class together with the class up here. It was great. I was interested to show our students here that they had equal counterparts and vice-versa. I did that one time, but after about 1975 or '76, I dropped all that. In '76, I took my sabbatical and spent ten months traveling through Africa and then got into the development banking analysis stuff.

*Did it ever happen that you made a conscious effort to get your activism focused more away from this place—to do the kinds of things you wanted to do as opposed to spending much time here? Was it ever sort of like using this as a camping ground, but you basically wanted to be out there in certain areas?*

Well, I wouldn't put it that way. I think you could say the Circle period was going "out there." If some-

body had told me, "You've got to choose at this point," I don't know how I would have answered it. In other words, what would I have done if, before I went, somebody sat down and said, as a mentor ought to do, "Look, the kind of publication you have to come up with is not going to be an applied publication. A study of solid-waste management practices across the country is not going to do it. You have to tell us how that fits into the kind of politics of inner-city development, or something." This was not in that study. It was just a study of what the problem is, how much waste is there, what kind of waste is it, what's the system to handle it, what are the cities doing about it? There was a policy question in it—should we go to recycling and how should we solve this problem? But we didn't take that very far and that wasn't my part of it anyway. Even with respect to South Africa—and I am fairly well known around the world as one of the founders and leaders of TransAfrica and one of the important architects of the American anti-apartheid movement—most of the considerable amount of stuff I wrote was not professional political science per se, and was not published in professional journals. It was testimony to Congress, strategy papers for activists and elected officials, op-ed pieces, articles for more popular outlets. I would not have gotten much benefit from it in a tenure evaluation. Fortunately, I was already tenured. Maybe that is the real value of the tenure system today—to allow for controversial work of political or social significance. But you have to get tenure first.

So, what if I had faced the kind of situation that came up recently regarding a tenure case I chaired and promoted for a colleague who was looking at peasant movements and dealing with what the peasants want and what they're doing? The reaction was, "Well, he doesn't tell us very much about what this means for social change generally. The theoretical connections aren't good enough. It's not social science enough. So we're not going to give him tenure." If someone had told me all of that, I would have been really in a pinch, because I would not have been inclined to devote myself to the general theoretical framework defined by the literature in urban politics. I would not let the gaps in the theory of that define what I should work on, versus being guided by the problem people are confronting in the streets and the problem you confront trying to engender an

income flow and jobs, and so on. There could have been a way to write about that after the fact, to connect it to the literature. But my fundamental motivation was not to fill the literature, it was to do the job. I did not feel pressed to see that as a career choice, that I was jeopardizing my career by going out and trying to actually create something that met the economic needs. We did have a theoretical framework in which this work was couched. It was quite an elaborate theoretical framework, but it was not what I intended to write up and put in the literature. I wrote it up in proposals here and there in order to get funding. We laid out our approach, which fundamentally came down to creating our own economic base for political action. That's how Circle fit into what Mel King was doing with the new organizations he was creating, the Precinct and Neighborhood Development Corporations.

But nobody posed that choice for me. I didn't feel that pressure and it worked out okay. Today I wouldn't ignore the career implications, knowing what I know now about MIT. If we had not been coming out of the turmoil of the late '60s and the '70s, even they may not have reacted to it in the same way. When I come up for tenure having done this work, it's seen as a positive link, you know what I'm saying?

*Exactly.*

Now, I don't want to say I got my job because of H. Rap Brown, but he's somewhere in the picture.

*And a lot of other folks down there, too.*

That's not to say that somebody should say that's just "affirmative action" and "for political reasons, folks felt pressure." It was an issue of relevance; but there was a recognition of relevance that disappeared when my group ceased to be a threat.

*What I hear you saying too is that you don't really believe that you received a scholarly mentor at that time but you really lucked out, so to speak.*

I lucked out, right. But I would have been a difficult case to mentor. Bob Wood had his own troubles with these same people. People in the department felt a sense of pride that we had a big name in Washington, but there was a sense that Bob Wood was stepping into muddy waters. I think, probably in some respects, there may even have been that sense with regard to others. Moynihan went down to Washington. Not to put

Bob Wood in the same category as a Kissinger, but you had a lot of people going to Washington and doing things. That's always given a positive valence, but it's still also seen in terms of the comment, "He never published anything great since." Bob Wood went down, he had published the megalopolis stuff, "five hundred urban governments." That's his last academic work. Since then he headed Model Cities, he then became Deputy Labor Secretary, then he came back and ran the Boston public schools and people thought of him as a case of unsatisfied ambitions.

To have set out to mentor me from an orthodox social science point of view would have been futile. I would not have taken to it. I would not have sensed that it was a proper choice for me. Thank God there was enough going on in the society, questioning the whole paradigm anyway. "The death of white sociology," that was what that was all about. The whole notion of relevance as some test for what you were doing was coming into vogue. That was a general phenomenon in this society, intellectually. It didn't all fall on our heads alone.

As time goes on, blacks continue to do that work and you have a case today, which you probably know about, on the other side of campus involving the same kind of issue. Here's a guy who has done superb work around issues of how you actually protect yourself as a community, advance yourself as a community and so forth, and people are saying, "Well, what's the level of scholarship?" and, "Does it place this person in the top ranks of urban planners or social scientists?" Well yes, in terms of *that* problem. I hope to God that we don't have yet another example of non-success in a tenure case because there isn't enough understanding of the relevance and the universality of the problems and experience we have as black people. That's the other thing. If you solve this problem for blacks in an inner-city area, there's a disinclination to think it's relevant to solving the same problem anywhere else.

Therefore, I don't think of it as a kind of general failure of mentoring, really—in today's context, perhaps. If you were looking back, you would say one needs somebody who is well positioned to know what's coming ahead, who really should give a junior colleague some sense of what the risks are. I don't fault Bob Wood for not saying, "You're taking a risk to go off and do this." I think he

breathed a sigh of relief when I came back with a bunch of significant writings. It's a tough one, because in what way should we sacrifice the people in order to fill a few academic posts?

*With all of your experience now, if you see a young Willard Johnson today, based on all your experiences and what you see down the road, what advice would you give?*

Well, I sort of give contradictory advice. I think the present case is a good example of this. He needed to publish the last two books that he's published and they are not off the track of his interest in actual community empowerment and things of this sort. On the other hand, if he were really aiming at either sociologists or political scientists—and urban studies, what discipline is that? That's an interdisciplinary program—he would probably be pushed to talk much more explicitly to the theoretical literature in his field than he does. Then you would say, well, that's the way to make sure you have it both ways.

But it's hard to do. It takes time and energy. He did a study for the Boston Foundation of all the literature dealing with poverty—what it was, really, maybe perceptions of race in the city. The point is that he went through tons of literature to do that. He categorized and organized it. They would have asked, “Did he add his own new theoretical frame to it?” In other words, is this review of the literature a basis for a new theory on these matters? Well, I can't say that. I don't think so; maybe not. But I think he's done a tremendous job of assimilating it, organizing it and making it accessible, and using that as a basis for how we think about problem-solving. But it doesn't have all the trappings of “a new theory.”

That standard of professional development—the hurdles one has to clear, so to speak—that is held up is to develop the task of developing new theoretical contributions, not just pieces of it, but somehow or another to create a highly visible theory. Well, that is something that is to me dangerous, actually, in assembling a faculty in which every member is sort of equally a stellar creator of “the new theoretical framework.” In my mind—I may be wrong on this—I don't think you can do that in many, many, many cases and also really have your feet on the ground, so to speak, and really understand how the world works in real-world conditions. You're abstracting from these problems

and creating and modeling it intellectually so that you can test certain propositions, and so forth and so on. It is so demanding and it's so impossible to do, and it requires you to step back from operationalized dealings with things, so you would wind up with people who really don't have much of a sense for how things work, actually work.

So I'm skeptical that you could build a whole department uniformly with people who are stellar because they are considered to be the theoretical leaders. You have to master theory, you have to deal with theory and in that sense contribute to theory, but I'm just saying you're not going to build a whole department where everyone is equally a theoretical scholar. You need to have the applied—not the “everyday,” but the more applied, more mundane, more on-the-ground or practical—exposure. You need people like that. You need people who know how the institutions work, know some of the people in the institutions they're studying, know the complexities of what it's like behind the scenes, and therefore who know some of the reality that you couldn't prove but you know to be true.

*Black people?*

Yes, but not just blacks—anybody who works intelligently in the world. There are lots of things you know that you will act on because you are sure, but you couldn't prove.

*Tell me something, for example, that you learned from Circle that you don't think you can theoretically prove but you know is a fact.*

That the capacity for, if not the inclination towards, altruism is widespread. I know that there are people who are committed to the general interest and who will work hard for it, but I cannot prove to you that that's a universal motivational component. And I cannot prove to you what exactly are the contextual factors that will elicit it. I know we had a Chuck Turner or a Mel King or a Willard Johnson who worked day and night sacrificially. A lot of people will do that, but I cannot tell you what it is that allows you to identify their psychological profile or their motivational background or their upbringing or their socio-economic status or whatever else that will let you know that when you have this circumstance, you're going to get this kind of person. Therefore, I don't know how you can be sure you can build an organization that will always bring

those people out of the woodwork. I think that if you do have such leadership, you will attract more such people.

*Black leadership?*

Right. I also know there is some cynicism and a lot of people will distrust those motives regardless of what's going on. That's also a factor. You do have to constantly find a way to allow people to think that their benefits are protected, whether or not this is true—in other words, not to have to rely on the beneficence, so to speak, of the leadership. It's really like people go to church and they'll put money in the basket, but not all their money in the basket. Sometimes they won't put it all in the first basket or in the second basket, they will split it up so that some of it will actually get to the missionary work and the rest of it will wind up with the minister.

So you get to have a feel for it. You have organizational structures to make it possible for these payoffs to be there, but you couldn't elaborate that into knowing precisely the circumstances under which it's going to work this way and this is proof that you're dealing with a genuine person. In the end, somebody you thought was good is going to turn and do some bad things and some of the folks that you never had any hope for actually turn out pretty good.

That's just a rough example. I can't say it's a lesson I've learned. Now, in the African case, I do believe that we are struggling with lots of theoretical problems on how to accomplish development. I have not yet really elaborated a theoretical statement about them. I suppose if I were to devote myself to a theoretical problem, it would be to explain why and how to indigenize the process. You can put it in the framework, I suppose, of capacity-building—you have to indigenize this process. You have to find ways for people within the country to control the process, develop the resources, and yet you will need outside assistance. It's the way in which development sort of becomes self-development, in a theoretical framework, and in which outside assistance can come in and yet foster internal capacity to direct and control and promote.

That's what I want to work on, but that would require enormous energy, so I'm probably not going to do it. Rather than that, I'm going to just work on certain aspects of how a foreign aid program might be sustained with a weak political

base and what that may mean for the shift between the focus on aid versus trade issues, industrial assistance to indigenize the industrialization process. It won't be grandiose, but it will be significant. If out of all that fine theory develops, that's great, but it's not my motivation to theorize.

I think probably my advice to most young people would be that, really, at least the race—if not the country—cannot yet afford to waste all of our talents in theory. I'm not putting down theory. I'm just saying that the structure—the marketplace, so to speak—for theoreticians is largely closed. It's based upon lots of institutional and in some cases ethnic realities, or you can think of it as networking frameworks. Certain people are in a position to say what they think is important whether or not they can show that it's really important. If you don't get into particular journals, you aren't taken seriously, and yet the rules by which you get into those journals don't map onto real problems very well. So you wind up going through all these hoops and doing all this networking and working the system and so forth, in effect really in order to preserve the structures that are already there. In most cases that's not really going to address our problems, which is one of the reasons it is such a shame we don't have good journals—not good in the sense of high-level, but able to be marketed, known, visible, and to sustain themselves, and so forth.

*Have we ever had one come close, by your assessment?*

Well, yes, *The Black Scholar* was at one time really a good journal and I thought that *Negro Digest* was good. Hoyt Fuller did a fantastic job with that journal. *Phylon* was good at a certain time. There's *The Journal of Negro History*. There have been times when the journals were there; I think right now you'd be hard put to name any. Part of the cost of not having those journals is having to kind of play a game. It really is a game. It's a game that's not really connected to advancing praxis, that is, the application of sound theory to real problems in a way that solves them.

So it's not easy for a young person coming into this field now. They must feel torn in a way that we haven't seen in a while because the problems are so great and so overwhelming. The disconnect between the requirements of being successful in academia and actually impacting on these problems seems so enormous.

*I saw Paul Gray today and I told him I was coming to see you. He said if there's anybody who knows about MIT, Willard Johnson does.*

(Laughing) Coming from Paul—oh, come on, Paul!

*I'm serious. That's what he said to me. It brings up a question that I wanted to use on the tail end of our discussion. I want to ask you to give a brief summary and experience of your perspective on the MIT experience as a faculty member.*

Well, let me tell you, the frustrations that have led me to consider early retirement essentially come down to the difficulty in getting these departments—and I start with my own, time after time after time—to appreciate the quality and relevance and significance of black scholarship. It is just an overwhelming problem. Some people may really have a racist bias. They will be surprised themselves, probably, but the blinders are just there. It's not “their group.” They know these are problems, but there's no real respect for even the significance of the problem to anybody else, nor for the work done on it. It's just frightening—case after case, time after time—seeing the ways in which people seemingly so open and honest about grappling with intellectual problems and so forth just can't quite get it.

Quite frankly, I'm sure I have advanced cases that were too weak, but it's certainly not the case with our present one. They ask, “Do you want to discuss that again?” I'm going to force people to think about it even tonight. We have a meeting. If they can't bring themselves to offer tenure to Richard Joseph, there is something fundamentally flawed in how these people think. I can't explain it on any basis other than racism, however subtle. After all, he had two major books and a third of significance, a series of key articles in major journals, and many notable chapters in books. He had run a major Ford Foundation program in West Africa and had run the Africa Program for the Carter Center. He was the key figure in designing and monitoring the first really democratic elections in Africa during the '90s. Despite all of that, he was denied tenure here. It seems that no serious black person can measure up for these people, perhaps precisely because they really are serious. That's been the problem. If they can't come to give tenure to a James Jennings, there's something fundamentally wrong. I already mentioned to you

James Carter, years ago. The benign aspect of it is understanding the way in which these people have grappled with the problems of people they care about, more than grappling with talking to the establishment of scholars, who may or may not care about those problems or people. In the end, the institution goes on essentially being the same, despite all the meetings on diversity and affirmative action.

I used to say to visitors to my office, “I hope they don't tumble down on your head”—the boxes of stuff piled up from the various committees on equal opportunity. There's all this discussion about the value of diversity. In some cases, we just said “affirmative action” and in other cases we just said, “We need to have a broader array of perspectives because it's good for us pedagogically, it's good for us in terms of a gender setting, it's good to mentor the people who are here, to connect with society,” and so forth and so on. But it's all just said as if they're mouthing it. When it comes down to real tests, they say, “Well, somehow or another this person doesn't quite measure up.” And I'm sure with this group that's here—you take my tenure case outside the context of the time, it probably would not have succeeded. Yet there's nothing flawed in the record that I put on the table there. It was good, theoretically well-constructed work I had done.

So the MIT experience has been awful from the point of view of struggling with the issue of making this discussion of diversity in the social sciences connect with practice. That is true for urban studies, economics, political science. I don't know, but I suspect it's not much different in engineering—just awful, despite the efforts made here and there, and there have been efforts. In the end, leadership has made a big difference. But there are still the structural problems, the decentralization, the extent to which these problems really come down to the tenured faculty in each of their domains and the difficulty of breaking through that if you don't have somebody willing to fight. That's one of the reasons why you need to have blacks in here, but you need to have good people.

If we're talking about fighting for tenured appointment and recruiting, it's the same thing on the admissions committees. The admissions committee in our department has been the easiest part because you almost always have some willingness to kind of stretch things and leave some room.

But then where we see the problem at the other end is, are we really able to teach—not just willing, able, to teach across a range of backgrounds and interests? The mentoring problems come to be more and more resented. People say we're spending all our time working with people who shouldn't be here.

By the way, this is not all about blacks. You can name the blacks because there are only two or three blacks. There is this sense that somehow or another we need to have a whole range of people. In the admissions committee I fight for people with real-world experience. I want to see folks who come in here who know what it is to hurt. The fact that they have scores at the 99th percentile on the GRE is not enough. We dip down into the upper 80's, in the end, for a lot of people because they've done some interesting work and have an approach to things that's mature, and so forth and so on. We've turned down some folks with 98th percentile GRE's because we on the committee were willing to stay an extra hour or two and do battle over what we really want. We want a mix of capacity with experience, with a sense of how to carry out the applied side of things, how to grapple with matching theory to real-world problems. In the admissions process we have to fight to keep students on the admissions committee because they tend to support that point of view. Those are fights we win. I mean, I look back on it and I'd say, even though we don't have all that many blacks in the department, we do have some diversity and I assume you can see that in other departments.

Then you look at the way in which even the students behave. Racism is there, they run into a problem and they drop you and go get somebody else. Well, if I've got a student in my class, say an advisee or something like that, and they think I'm going to give them a hard time with their work—especially if they're white, okay?—they'll drop you. If they think you're not going to be well positioned to give them the job they want in the white world—and the world is white—they drop you. So actually, it's been an awful experience from time to time dealing with some of the students.

*These are graduate students?*

It's more on the graduate student level than the undergraduate. But there is another dimension, too. You've got to get people to perceive, to be

willing first of all, to have a black person in authority over them. It's very hard for white Americans and hard for whites elsewhere, less so for other people elsewhere. But for white Americans, it's always a problem. It's not that solvable.

I've had a number of white students. I've had some very good white students who I really put out for, but who in the end went to someone else. And I don't forget it. I mean, I really extended for them. I'm not hostile to them in a sense that I talk to them and on some occasions I've even written letters despite all of that. But if it comes up in any way, if somebody says—"How come this person did work in your area and you weren't the supervisor?"—I say, "At one time I was, and then that person chose to jump ship."

*What about your grad students?*

I haven't had very many black students at the graduate level, but those with whom I have worked have done pretty well. Georgia Persons and Marsha Coleman are outstanding examples. Some have kind of drifted over to me, even though I did not supervise their dissertation, because they feel a connection there.

*They worked on some of the same issues that you were dealing with.*

That's right. I worked with Alma Young, but she also had other mentors, and she's great. She's still feeling the loneliness out there, and so are a number of them. Walter Hill is another example. But what pains me is the difficulty, the sort of hypocrisy in a lot of white students who will talk to you in the hallways and tell you that they're interested in your course and then never take it.

*And you recognize that, too.*

Oh yes, of course. So we have a long way to go in building the framework. Students aren't going to be high risk takers and in a way I can't blame them. If they come through and they perceive that because somehow or another this person is marginal in the department, they're marginal in the profession. Now why are they marginal in the department? Because they keep fighting for stuff they lose on. So you've got a certain tenseness there.

Now maybe there's respect, sometimes you don't know. I mean, even in the adversary there may be respect. The general kind of tenor that develops in all of this is, "Here you are over here

in this corner always fighting, usually fighting,” and it must affect students’ sense of who you’re working with. One answer to that would be not to have any blacks around and then they wouldn’t have that problem—or, get a bunch more and then all the fighting won’t fall on one and in a certain sense people would take it more as normal, as a more normal part of their existence. Under those circumstances, you’d better have a sense of why you’re in this. If you’re in it in order simply to be the academic gamesman, you’re probably going to lose or you’re doing a “Tom” to your heart.

*I think that is really a very important comment for young folks to hear from somebody who spent thirty-five years in a major institution like MIT.*

I don’t think you can say I Tommed.

*Oh, absolutely not. That’s why I think you need to say that. It has a lot to do with the way you came in terms of your activism, I think. Somehow or another I keep connecting what you’re saying with a chosen way or path that you’ve taken.*

Yes, I don’t resist the notion of choice if I reflect back on it and say, “Are you rational? Are you aware of the costs and benefits of doing this?” But it’s not chosen from the point of view that I have had any choice about it. That is to say, I would not be a professor at this or any other institution if I could not really work on the problems that matter.

To MIT’s credit, I’ve been here thirty years, I did get tenure, I have had resources put in my hands time and time again. I’ve won some battles. I get wearied by having to keep fighting them, but this has not been a place that’s beat me down, even with all of that. But, denying a tenure offer to Richard Joseph is inexcusable and not really subject to rational explanation. The *best* face I can put on that is racial discrimination. Here is a Rhodes Scholar with two major books, a third quite notable one, and many, many stellar chapters and articles. He has the experience of developing and running a significant project of the Ford Foundation regarding human rights in West Africa, and he has conducted a very significant program at the Carter Center in Atlanta. He played a major role in designing and monitoring the first really open and democratic election in recent times in Africa, that led to the first instance of the replacement by election of an African head of state. And this was not enough to warrant tenure?

That is the major reason I took early retirement. I hope younger people will see the need and have the courage and energy to continue this fight. This need will continue for some time. I hope they will not be destroyed in the process, or deflected from combining scholarship with activism. We, and the country, still need that combination.

By and large, I can say I’ve got a bunch of friends around. They’re not close friends, but I don’t walk along with a cloud over my head and people don’t jump to the other side of the street or something, take a different alley, down the hallway or whatever. So I don’t put it so much as choice. I used to say it is an orientation to the work that fundamentally is outward-looking. That doesn’t mean I go out, that I’m not here, that I don’t hang around here. I’m here a lot, or at home, but I’m not here in terms of this being the center of my gravity, so to speak. My commitment is not primarily to build MIT. In building what I do build, I have helped build MIT. I think we’ve talked about this to others.

One of the nice things about MIT as a group of engineers, at least, and maybe even scientists, is their appreciation of trying to make these things fit *out there* to solve problems. There’s tolerance for that, really. And at certain points in time, I was cavalier about it. I said, “Well, Bob Wood can go off and serve the government, I’m going to go serve the people. I’ll take my two years and go to the community and that’s equivalent.” That was in no wise equivalent.

*That was your thinking, though.*

Well, in a sense, but I think it is the same elsewhere. If you look around the country at most black academics who really have anything, it’s just nice to see somebody like Skip Gates or Cornel West do it with such verve and style and resources. I must say that we have got to give Skip credit because he has put together some stuff and it does serve. I don’t think Skip would have made it on the basis of his contribution to the theoretical formulations alone. He is stylish in terms of how he discusses things, but if he weren’t such a factor in the world then he wouldn’t be at Harvard. He wouldn’t have been because of his standard in the theoretical world. And the same for Cornel. Did they choose to go out and change the world and then tell Harvard, “Okay?” I don’t think so, I think

it's in their nature that they're concerned about working on these problems and bringing the two together. They've insisted that wherever they go they be allowed to do that, they're given the resources to do that, and they've just been able to be prolific and stylish enough in doing it so people in the end say they'd rather have them around and give them the credit on both sides of the fence than not.

But it must take a toll. Certainly it's taken a toll with me. It robs the psyche a lot of times because you would like to just be able to get the resources and go apply them to these problems. Just to try, somehow or another, to be what they might expect you to be would mean pursuing a constantly moving goalpost. It would not be very much concerned with really solving problems out here. And it's not like that at MIT. The great institutions come to grips with that. I don't imagine there is a single black scholar—well, very few—who is really visible and who does not feel these tensions.

*Describe the tensions again.*

Of feeling that your commitment to making a difference will be undervalued. You want your use of the theoretical frameworks, the generation of the theoretical material, to be judged by you for its practicality, not from its disciplinary impact and its acceptance and the number of citations and its ability somehow or another to connect with the scholarly world.

Somebody who has connected well with this sort of established American social science community would be Thomas Sowell. Thomas Sowell has made a real contribution in the area of “ethnic adaptation” and “migrant success.” Maybe he's even contributed to the theory, but so often it seems that he is almost gratuitously giving ammunition to the enemy—the Tom factor, you know. He has made much more sound contributions to actual discourse around the issues than, say, a Clarence Thomas, but they're something of the same kind of caliber. They're being used. At various times people around here, prominent people in the Boston area, have served the purposes of their institutions in unbecoming ways, even though you could say—and I'm thinking not of this institution, but other institutions in the Boston area—it's a shame because we really had real achievers. But it just seemed that somehow or

another the political agenda of white America and even conservative white America took over.

I don't want to be more explicit than that, but I think the tension is always between an academic establishment that is fundamentally, if not hostile to, at least distant from, poor people, people of color. It is an establishment. The academies, the journals, the foundations, the fellowships, the sources of fellowship money, the sources of research funding, and the major prestigious university institutions and research centers and so forth are in that establishment. Fundamentally, we are not. We only have a foot in the door here and there. So if somebody comes along and really wants to be a mover and shaker in that world, they often have a high price to pay.

I think some people have been able to succeed without doing that. I look at Ruth Simmons. She is the president now of Smith College. I don't perceive that she has bent to be prominent and influential and respected. At least she must have been respected, but in the end I don't know that it's academia that made her president. I think there's a corporate as well as a certain academic element to it.

*I heard it was something like a Bob Wood.*

Is that right? Who really engineered that? But the point is that one of the nice things is that here's a person of integrity who has really been there—major white institution of the white establishment. In a way you can say that a Johnetta Cole does not represent the same phenomenon. She is a real mover and a real shaker, but she wound up at black institutions in order to do that. I don't think they would have made a Johnetta Cole the president of any major institution. I don't know how much respect Bob Keith gets or not. I don't know that John Turner is going to be able to emerge in a comparable position in a smallish but well-established white college. I thought he left Knoxville College years ago.

*I think a few years ago.*

Well, the corporate world is a way to come back, too, in a certain sense. I don't know that Chris Wharton, the head of TIAA/CREF, had been much of an academic. I mean, certain people have been able to do things. None of them are known as theoreticians. All of them have some kind of combination of being able to organize and deal with the corporate world. So it's tough. I don't

know what advice to give to young people who are looking to an academic career.

*Did you know Ron Brown very well?*

No.

*Did you know his background at all?*

Well, just by reading. I met him. I had a lot of respect for the role he was able to play. As a businessman, I don't know that I would hold him up as a real model, but I don't know. You just assume there was a lot of stuff going on, so many things going on, but he was still a fine person, it seems.

I was just dealing more with an academic side of things, somebody coming up really aware of their professional academic role. This is not for all students. I tell it at the graduate student level where the issue of career choice becomes sort of the corporate or governmental world out there versus academia. To make it in academia poses the special set of problems that I've been talking about. They may be comparable in the corporate world; I don't know that world. I don't even know what it's like on the staff side of academia, but I can imagine. But it does seem to me to be easier for staff than for academics.

*You're talking about your long history here. It's very depressing, frankly, to hear you talk honestly about what you would say to, say, a young Clarence, or your daughter who wanted to come into academia.*

I would say that the fundamental motivation has to be to solve real problems that are important to you. Academic institutions, in many instances, will offer you a chance to do that. It offered me a chance to do that and I've done that—not without some psychic costs, and not without a whole lot of luck. But I wouldn't go into an academic career with the expectation of big-time. I mean, really bright people ought to aim for big-time stuff, unless the fundamental motivation is just to think about problems—you know, they're fascinating and somehow or another you like teaching; go to a teaching-oriented school to do that. That's a different thing, that's teaching.

But I meant research academia. Here I think you fundamentally have to be driven by the interest in the problems and then you just have to push and fight for the opportunity to address those problems. We have to, we who are established, create this space for people to do that, and it is a constant battle. It's an obligation. You've got to go be

on these review committees, in the journals, you've got to go be on the award-giving committees for the foundations and the fellowships, because otherwise they're not going to be here. People who come along with the kind of interest we have are going somehow or another to be marginalized. The institution's going to say, "Oh, well, we're not so sure that the theoretical range for this one will really travel very well to other problems, is well-grounded, et cetera. Is this really feasible? When this is done, will the person have a basis for solving other, similar problems?" All this is just different ways of saying "parochial," "limited," "not us"—the rest of the world saying, "Okay, you solved the problems for this one, but that doesn't mean anything for anybody else."

So double duty, you've got to go be on these committees. Anybody here at MIT would probably say that. It's your civic responsibility, professional citizenship, and so on. You've got to do all that, but we've got to go the extra mile because when you go there, it's not just being willing to read a bunch of folders, it means that you have got to fight for somebody who's fighting for something. It means that it's going to take stuff out of you when you do it. You go there and it's not going to be an emotionally placid, level operation. You're going to find yourself fighting with your good liberal friends again in the SSRC, in the whatever.

*So you're always by yourself, fighting.*

It's for you to decide whether that's just a personality trait. There are some people like that and they're just cantankerous, versus this being a real dimension of the situation. All I can say is, my perception of it is that whenever you look into those matters, even if things are going right, you're going to meet with at least one case where a person who ought to have a hearing is not getting it. And it will fall on you to make space for that hearing. That's going to make you come back tense, uptight, and angry.

*It's good to have Vivian at home, isn't it?*

Well, she asked me the same thing. She has to fight, too. Oh my goodness, and we would look at each other and we'd say, "We've been at this thing for so long, we shouldn't have to be doing this." Then, of course, sometimes you find that it comes back in your face because you have to fight for

some folks who can't really do it. You made a mistake and you just have to have the maturity to say you will make mistakes. Here you try hard for a black person to get in there and they really should not be. Well, that happened to whites as well! It's a step back to maturity to say, "Well, that's true. Maybe one or two of my candidates shouldn't have been here."