

JOHN M. DEUTCH

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I was born in Europe. I immigrated to the United States with my family at a young age. I went to elementary school in Virginia and to high school in Washington, D.C., at the Sidwell Friends School. It's probably worthwhile noting that at that time the Sidwell Friends School was not integrated. I never went to school with a black until I went to college at Amherst in 1956. There were three blacks in my class at Amherst at that time, out of 250.

Have you seen them since you finished college?
I see them at reunions when I go back.

When you look back as far as that period of time before you got to college, who would you consider your heroes, your mentors, or people you really looked up to as role models?

Well, my father above all. My father had a tremendous influence on me. Both my father and my mother and a lot of my father's friends had a big influence on me. He had one friend named Paul Aiken who was a neighbor and who had a great deal of influence on me. My football coach in high school had a big influence on me. All sorts of people had a tremendous impact on me as I was growing up.

Could you say a little bit more about your parents in terms of their background?

My father was born in Russia and was educated in Belgium, where he married my mother, who was Belgian. They both went to the University of Brussels. They both got Ph.D.'s. They came from fairly well-to-do backgrounds and came here

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because of the Second World War, because of the German invasion of Belgium in May 1940.

Tell me a little bit about the kinds of interracial contacts you've had over the years. Do you recall the early civil rights movement?

Yes, I do, because it was happening while I was in college at Amherst. The march in Selma was what year?

1954 or 1955.

It was a little bit later than that, but I remember at Amherst there was a lot of discussion about whether guys in my generation were going to take part in it. I remember in my fraternity, a person who was a year younger than me said should he go down there and do some marching in one of the marches at the time. I remember advising him not to go, that it was not something that I would recommend somebody get involved with.



I would say my interracial sensitivity or experience was very low until I got older, until I understood the world better than I did at that time. I know where it happened. It happened at the Pentagon, where the Army was so serious about the problems of dealing with an integrated force, especially after Vietnam. When I saw their commitment and their success in achieving integration, then I became more aware of the racial problems throughout the country. I became much more interested in the whole process of bringing the society together.

I was quite heavily influenced by a reading I did about the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the terrible problems in that empire when they were doing a simpler job, I think, than the United States faces today—integrating Hungarians and Austrians. I found it quite touching that a lot of the issues that were confronted at that time—affirmative action, a whole series of questions of equality, the feeling of community—were not handled properly then, but I thought in some ways maybe better than our country is handling them today. I became more convinced of the need to devote really serious attention to integration everywhere in society. I came late to it. It came late to me, but it was something that became important.

You mentioned the Pentagon and the armed services. There's a view by many people, and I tend to share that view, that they tend to do probably one of the better jobs of any agency in our society in dealing with the issue of race.

The Army, absolutely.

Do you know why that's the case?

Yes. Because after Vietnam, when there were very intense racial tensions, a young set of Army officers who ended up being the leadership knew that they were going to be dealing with an integrated military force, and they made a conscious decision all up and down the line to assure that there was equality and a fraternity among people that didn't pay any attention to the color of a person's skin. I think that's very much the case, and I would hold up the U.S. Army as being the best example of racial equality in our country.

What have you seen recently that may be hopeful in this whole arena of race relations, particularly after spending considerable time in Washington?

I think there are a lot of things that are hopeful. Not everything is hopeful, but some things are

hopeful. I think the tremendous growth of black Americans in places like MIT in the undergraduate student body is very optimistic. I think that's a big success. I think we have a lot to thank Paul Gray for, his leadership in accomplishing that.

That's one hopeful sign. I think the strength of the historically black colleges and universities is another hopeful sign that they're becoming sophisticated, knowledgeable, serious educational institutions and have strong commitments to their own purposes, but are also interacting well in government, with government agencies, and with other institutions. So there are very strong signs.

Particularly in your own role here at MIT as provost and dean of the School of Science and as a contributor on the faculty in a very significant way, what have you liked best or least about MIT's efforts to increase the black presence on campus here?

I like best the student program, as I said. I think students have been brought in here in MITES and a variety of other programs in an intelligent way. The admissions department has been very good at spotting students who are going to have a productive time at MIT, only accepting students who are able to survive the rigorous MIT undergraduate education. I think that the Equal Opportunity Committee, which was chaired by Herman Feshbach for so many years, has been a positive force in bringing administrators and faculty together under a strong person who is committed. I think Paul Gray's commitment to this is something which is really unique, sustained, and very important. So the student part of it, I think, has been very good and satisfying.

One of the parts that I find less successful, first of all, is that we still are not able to identify and attract black American faculty members. I guess I still worry about the continued separateness of black students on campus once they get here—separate living group, separate eating together, things like that. Now I must say, I've been away for four years, so I don't know how much of that is going on now. I understand it. I sympathize with it, but I wish there was more integration—with a small "i"—in student life. But the two big disappointments would be that and also the absence of our success in attracting black American faculty.

Let me just press you a little bit on the issue of black faculty. I know that you and Paul made major efforts to get departments to try to increase the number of black and

other minority faculty members. We weren't that successful. When you look back on it and as you see it today, what do you think are the reasons we can't do it?

It's pretty clear that especially in science and engineering the pool is very small. We are competing for those individuals with other schools who care as much about adding to their black faculty as we do. The younger Ph.D. graduates are attracted away by industry at much more attractive salaries. Many of them had loans from their experience as undergraduates and graduates. Facing the early years of an academic career is not as attractive as going to work for Bell Labs or going to work for IBM or the like. I think it's really a world of small numbers.

I don't excuse lack of performance, but I don't think MIT's record is bad compared to other schools. I don't know what I would do. I don't know if, looking back, there's any single thing that could have made a difference.

Do you see anything when you look at it now, just from a general viewpoint, with the host of experiences you've had in other places?

I don't have an answer. I haven't been back long enough to really have an appreciation of what the circumstances are like now on the ground at MIT, but I think it's a hard problem and until that pipeline really gets broader, it's going to be hard to do.

I want to shift to another topic, and that is mentoring young blacks in various capacities or positions that you've held, not only here but elsewhere. Your name has come up in several people's interviews. You can't say that you haven't been a mentor to a number of people. Can you talk about some of the people you think you've had some influence on?

I think one person who I'm very fond of and have had a big influence on is Kofi Bota, who is a graduate student here. He and I just got along right away. We were similar kinds of people. I stayed close to him all along. He's one that sticks out prominently in my mind as a person who really worked closely with me.

I don't really think of people by color, you know what I mean? I've had a lot of happy and successful work relationships with black Americans. I was heavily influenced when I was in Washington the first time in the Department of Energy by my secretary, Luana Clark. I think she mentored me. I do think it is terribly important to

students, especially, to make sure that they have support when they come to a place like MIT. We have, I think, a fairly consistent program.

You worked very closely with the only African-American we had on the Academic Council.

Shirley McBay.

What do you think about when you hear the name Shirley McBay?

Well, I have tremendous affection for her. I think she is a person of standards and of principle. I was a big fan of Shirley's. I was a big advocate of her. Not everybody always was, but I think she did an excellent job here. As I say, I'm perfectly happy with her performance, and, as I say, there's nothing more important than a person who has real standards and integrity. She had that. It was a good experience.

That's interesting, because I have interviewed those two people you mentioned, and they basically said the same thing about you. Maybe that's the way it has to work. What advice would you give to young blacks coming into MIT?

I think the thing that worries me the most is the consequence of the policy of admitting all qualified blacks who apply. We don't take all qualified white young men and women who apply. The result is that the black population will have more people in it who are going to face challenges in their academic experience here. I fear discouragement from that or the fact that they see that more of their visibly similar colleagues are having to stretch to make it, to get a feeling of frustration from that or a feeling of despair. They just have to stick to it. I worry that they'll be discouraged because of that.

In other words, I think we all realize if you look at the college boards, just to take an indicator, the distribution among black students is not the same as among whites. The result is that you can expect some of these individuals will need to take more time to learn material or master material. I worry that sometimes that will lead to a feeling of discouragement about the process. I would say individual patience is a very important property here, keeping at it.

You think that kind of process is necessary, though.

Absolutely. You see, if you said we are going to insist on the same distribution—highest percentile—you're going to have fewer blacks coming

to MIT because there's even more competition for the high percentile. I'm quite convinced it's the right road we're on, but there will be more pressure on the black student community.

If I take that and also look at the whole issue on a national level in terms of affirmative action, how do you equate the two? It's a big issue now.

Well, I'm a great believer in affirmative action. I had trouble when I was in the Cabinet, when the Court struck down a certain kind of affirmative action and George Stephanopoulos and others tried to structure a way of proceeding so that the Justice Department was able to continue to make reasonable steps. My view was, to hell with it. I call it affirmative action—keep on doing the same thing, because I do think it's important for the future of the country to stress opportunity. For me, it's opportunity. Giving qualified black Americans opportunity is quite different from saying you have quotas or things like that.

That's a big issue in the black community, particularly even among black students here, to get them to actually understand what you are saying and the stick-to-it-ness and patience that you're saying are necessary. Around them, quite frequently, they see the performance of others, in many cases, done with a little bit more ease, I would say. But, on the other hand, the idea of accepting the fact that they're not in the same quartile as others are, that's tough for them to accept.

I can understand that. I can appreciate that, but if you say, "Would you change your policy?" I would say no. What could MIT do to mitigate that? I would not want to give up the prospects of having more black Americans here learning and taking advantage of it.

Well, I'm happy to hear that and I totally agree. We know that patience has in the past paid off tremendously for a host of African-Americans who are doing some very outstanding work now. I've interviewed at least a hundred of them. There's a guy named Jim Turner, for example, who is the head of one of the federal laboratories and who got his Ph.D. from here. He's in Oakland, I guess it is, at an energy laboratory there. He's just one example of people who have gone on and are doing some very successful work. They had the stick-to-it-ness and patience.

Are there any nuggets of wisdom you could give based on the really vast amount of experience you've had in this whole issue?

One thing I would mention that has impressed me is the importance of leadership at the top. Paul Gray really was committed to this, and it had an influence everywhere, including on me. So when I went to the Pentagon, I insisted on having representation by myself and Bill Perry and Les Aspin on our Defense Equal Opportunity Council, which certainly continued the work with the intelligence community when I was there. I tried to convey to everybody the importance of race relations in this country. It's the serious challenge we all face. Leadership at the top is the most important thing. I really do think that Paul was especially committed and we all, in the history of the place, owe him the biggest debt of gratitude.

You certainly have a member of the choir here. I couldn't agree with you more. The more I look at all of the past history of this place, particularly in the late '60s up to the present, there is no person I know of who has done more. Absolutely.