

Interview

A Conversation with John Hope Franklin

On Monday evening, November 9, 1998, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University hosted a public conversation with Dr. John Hope Franklin, Professor Emeritus of History at Duke University. Dr. Franklin discussed his lifelong experiences with racism. He also presented critical perspectives on his work as chair of President Clinton's Race Initiative in 1997-1998.

M.M.

John Hope Franklin: You don't know how good this makes me feel to be back in touch with real live students and have the opportunity to exchange ideas, points of view, thoughts and so forth with you. I've lived a fairly long time—not as long as some people, but longer than most people—and I am continuing to learn. I have had experiences in the past six months that have taught me things that I never thought I would learn. I have also learned that human nature is slow to change, if indeed it ever changes. I'd think that the questions that are going to be propounded by Manning Marable will give me the opportunity to say many of the things that I would say if he were not questioning me. So let me just say one or two brief things that perhaps he will not be concerned about.

One of them is that I was born in a village eighty-three years ago with no running water, no electricity, no plumbing of any kind (not indoors, anyway), and with the bleakest most difficult days and nights: wondering what to do, how to do [it] and if there was anything to do. That was my life until I was ten years old. When it was suggested that a certain candidate for the Supreme Court did not have run-

ning water until he was seven years old, and now that he's an associate justice, I think that if you don't get running water until you're ten years old, you might be a candidate for Chief Justice.

But for those of you who don't know what it is to live under those circumstances: no parks, no libraries . . . One of our great recreations was to clean the chimneys of the lamps that we would use in the dark. Another was to get the Sears Roebuck catalog with my sister. She would pick out things on her side and I would pick things out on mine, wondering if you're going to have anything during Christmas or for any other holiday. The thing that I think sustained us the most was—you might not believe this—our family, our parents, were educated people. My mother was a graduate of Roger Williams University. My father went to Roger Williams and to Morehouse College (then called Atlanta Baptist College). Their presence, their outlook, their point of view sustained us.

My mother used to tell me she didn't want me to do very much, but she wanted me to do the best I could. And she would be satisfied with nothing less than the best. She used to add to that: "The angels couldn't do any better than the best; be satisfied with nothing less than your best." And as for my father, he read all the time, day and night. Until I went to college, I never saw my father a night where he wasn't reading or writing. I thought that what was what you were supposed to do at night. I'm still having problems with television because I have to write, because that's what my daddy did. One of the greatest pleasures of my life was to take some of his writ-

ings, [as] I did three years ago with my son, and edit the autobiography that he wrote in his late years. That was a kind of realization, even after his death, of the great aspirations that he had all his life. Those two people have been a kind of model for me, rigorous and uncompromising.

[During] my life as a kid, the Chicago Civic Opera Company came to Tulsa, Oklahoma, each year after they completed their winter and spring tour in the city of Chicago. They would come there for about ten days and I went to the opera—but not with my parents. They wouldn't be caught in any place that was segregated. They were very liberal with their children. They said, "If you want to go and demean yourself, disgrace yourself . . ." it is for you to decide.

I said in a documentary that that is when I learned to love *La Boheme*, *Traviata*, *Madame Butterfly*. Then I reproached myself—as I continue to reproach myself—that I learned under those conditions. I said I shouldn't have gone. I am just suggesting some of the things that have had an impact on me one way or the other. Until this very day, I regret having learned opera under those circumstances.

What I'm trying to suggest is that my parents had higher ideals, and much higher standards and much greater honor and much greater self-respect. I aspired to be like them because they were really something. I haven't reached there, but, with the help of society, at least I don't go to Jim Crow places. I don't think that's to my credit. It's to [the] credit of the society in which we live. And I'm going to stop, Manning, and maybe we can just talk about the things you want to talk about.

Manning Marable: Your initial comments are a good segue to talk about how you grew up in Oklahoma and attended Fisk University in the Jim Crow area. We had an earlier conversation this evening and you talked about

our mutual love of Fisk University. When I taught there, what I loved about it was the history of the place. In the chapel, where I'm sure you've spoken many times, you stand behind the podium and you can recall Du Bois's famous challenge in 1924 against Fayette McKenzie in his effort to turn Fisk away from higher education. A decade later, Du Bois delivered a famous address at that same podium, addressing the future of the Negro college.

JHF: I heard him deliver that speech.

MM: *I wonder if you could talk about growing up in the Jim Crow South in 1930s, attending college, growing up in Oklahoma. I knew about the Tulsa race riots in 1921 and that was a background for how you grew up.*

JHF: I was born in the village of Rentiesville, where I was, by the way, a few weeks ago. It's just a pittance of a place. I don't think the population is even 100 now. My father, who moved there in 1911, could not make a decent living for his family there. He decided to leave and he went to Tulsa in 1921. He left us there [in Rentiesville]. My mother's school was not out and we were in school. As soon as school was out, we [would move to] Tulsa, where he had already made wonderful connections. He was thriving as a youngish lawyer, and got a house for us and furnished it.

All of a sudden we could hear nothing. We couldn't hear from him and we didn't know what had happened. Then we got the *Muskogee [Phoenix]* and we learned there was a race riot in Tulsa. There was no telephone, radio, television—no way to communicate over those seventy-odd miles, except if you were lucky to get a newspaper. This newspaper described the riot, and we didn't know if my father was living or dead. They said dozens, scores of people, had been

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killed. The homes of black Tulsans had been looted and then bombed. This was the first use of the bomb after World War I on civilians in this country. They just bombed us out. We finally got a message from my father saying he was still alive and unhurt but absolutely without any resources—not even a change of clothing, because he had been interned in the convention hall with hundreds of other blacks. To make a long story short, we couldn't move that summer because there was nowhere to move, nowhere for anyone to move. We had to endure four more years in Rentiesville. We did not move until 1925.

Then I went to middle school and then high school in Tulsa and graduated from the high school—the Booker T. Washington High School—in 1931. I (fast forward) was there last year to be inducted into the Booker T. Washington Hall of Fame. It is now the finest and most sought-after high school in the city. It is not even on the borderline; it's over in the black ghetto. But white people in Tulsa would kill to get their kids in. David Boren, the former senator, was telling me when I was in his house a few months ago, in Norman, Oklahoma, where he is now president of the University of Oklahoma—he says it's the best high school in the state.

I had my first real experience with segregation, with racial humiliation, in Tulsa. Going through a small town south of Rentiesville, where we did our shopping, the railroad train had stopped because we had flagged it down. We got on the coach in front of us and sat down, and then we found out it was a white coach. We were told by a white conductor that we could not sit there. My mother said, "We cannot move while the train is moving. My children might get hurt." And he said, "Well, I'll stop the train." Instead of letting us move to another coach, he put us off in the woods.

That was one incident that gave my mother the opportunity to tell us what this was all

about. I was crying, and she said, "Don't cry. There's nothing to cry about. The man put us off and that's all right. What you need to remember is that there was no one on the train better than you. Only because there is some crazy law that says you must not sit with these other people, that's why you were put off. But remember, you don't have the time or the energy or the emotion to waste crying about some terrible people like them." She said, "You must remember one thing: that you are good enough to ride anywhere with anybody. You take that through life." On that day, I stopped fretting and worrying about all this foolishness that we've seen. I have to put my energies somewhere else and try and solve some of the problems which I confront, which all of us confront.

There were many other instances in Oklahoma. But I thought that now, since I was leaving Oklahoma, I was leaving that behind me. I was going to Tennessee. I was going to a university, and perhaps I would be sheltered from that. To the extent that I could, I did shelter myself from that, to be very frank. But I did have to go downtown now and then in Nashville, Tennessee.

I went down when I was a freshman. It was the first week or so when I was in Nashville. When we got ready to get on the streetcar to come back out to Fisk from downtown Nashville, I found myself with one piece of money, and that was a \$20 bill. I think that was the only \$20 bill I ever had in college. I walked to the window of the transfer station, and as I put my money in the window, I apologized for having a large bill. I said, "Sorry, this is all that I have. However you want to change—if you want to give me dollar bills or anything . . ." And he said, "Listen. No nigger tells me how to make change." I'm sixteen. I don't know what's going on. He says, "You can't tell me how to make change," and then he proceeded to give me back my change in nickels and dimes. I had

just a wadful. I don't know whether it was \$20 or not: \$18, \$19.75. I don't know, but it was a searing experience. I said, What in the world was going on? I can count how many times I went back to downtown Nashville after that over the next four years. I just couldn't stand it. I couldn't bear it.

Many years later I was doing research in the State Department of Archives and History in Montgomery, Alabama. The then archivist [was] Ms. Marie Bankhead Owens, the sister of John Bankhead and the Senator Bankhead and the aunt of Tallulah Bankhead. I went in to see her to get permission to look at the Governor Winthrop Papers that were still under seal. I went into her office and she did not invite me to sit down and I did not sit down. I told her what I wanted and she said, "Sure. You can have whatever you want." She said, "How are they treating you?" And I said, "They're treating me very well, thank you very much. I was able to get all the materials I want, and this is the one thing they told me I'll have to get permission [for] from you." And she said, "Well, I'm delighted to give you permission."

And then she said, "They tell me there's a Harvard nigger here. Have you seen him?" And her secretary was in the next room—I learned all this etiquette: The doors don't close between a white woman and a black man, you see, and her secretary could hear everything she was saying to me—and she said, "That's him, Ms. Owens. That's him." And she said, "You a Harvard nigger?" And I said, "I went to Harvard, yeah." And she said, "You don't act like a Harvard nigger." I didn't know how one was supposed to act.

She knew. She said, "You got right nice manners." And she said, "Sit down." (At last I can get off my feet.) And she said, "Where were you born and raised?" "Oklahoma," I replied. And she said, "That won't do it." And then she said, "Where did you go to college?" And I said, "Nashville, Tennessee." And she said, "That's it, good ol' Confederate state."

And I thought about that man in the ticket booth in Nashville: That's where I learned my manners? She came to all those conclusions just by my standing

up and not sitting down until she asked me, just being gracious to her as I only knew how to be. Then she wanted to keep me all afternoon to talk to me and I was in a hurry to get back and work on those papers and get out of there. I then became great and good friends with her. I don't know how she would feel now that my own Ph.D. student is head of the Alabama archives, but I hope that she would like it. Wherever she is, maybe she found out. I don't know.

MM: One of those things that is striking for my generation of black intellectuals and historians is the kind of connection between you and Du Bois. Part of that connection is Fisk University and part of that connection is the craft of history. So this is really a two-part question. Could you talk about how it was that you devoted your life to history and the pursuit of African-American history at a time when very few scholars took that step, and, secondly, what your relationship was with Dr. Du Bois?

JHF: Du Bois was an icon all during my childhood and my young manhood and at

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home and later at Fisk. I am named for W.E.B. Du Bois's best friend, John Hope, who taught my mother and father at Roger Williams University. It was my father who had followed John Hope to Atlanta Baptist College when my mother had graduated and gone back to West Tennessee to teach. There was always W.E.B. Du Bois before me because I had been named for John Hope. So when Du Bois came to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in February 1926, my mother and father were so excited that Du Bois was coming to town that they took me to see him. I don't remember much about that visit. I was eleven years old. I was trying to hear him, but one of the things that distracted me was that he had on a full dress suit and I had never seen a full dress suit before—white tie and tails—and I wondered why all this attire. Later I learned that he was wearing two great decorations he had received from Haiti and Liberia. And you only wore those when you wore full dress clothes. So there he was. If I didn't remember what he said, I do remember that outfit and I said, This man is worth watching anyway.

I saw him many times after that. You mentioned that he visited Fisk. He not only came to Fisk and turned it around in 1924 when he spoke there and literally was the cause of a revolution and the running away of the white president Fayette McKenzie, but he came back often. He was there in 1933, when he delivered that remarkable speech on the field and function of the American Negro College. And then he came back more than once when I was there. I never got close to him during that period of time.

MM: Did anybody get close to him?

JHF: I think not many people. I was never even introduced to him. I didn't get a chance to even meet him. My father and mother did not know him when he came to Tulsa. They just admired him because he was who he

was. It was not really until I was in graduate school at Harvard that I saw him again after the Fisk days. He came to speak, not at Harvard, but at the Ford Hall Forum. He wouldn't speak at Harvard in those days. Professor Schlesinger, my seminar adviser and the father of the present Arthur Schlesinger Jr., suggested to us that we ought to go. He told us of his great admiration for Dr. Du Bois, so we all went down to hear him and once more I didn't get a chance to say anything to him. It was not until I had completed all my graduate work and was working on my dissertation in North Carolina that I saw him close up for the first time.

I was having my meal at a small hotel in Raleigh. You must remember this was 1939 and there is no place in North Carolina or in Virginia that you could even go to the toilet. So you had to discipline yourself from Washington to Atlanta. And there was no place to eat except [a] hotel in Richmond and the Arcade Hotel in Raleigh. And you can sit in this dining room and see everyone. They all pass through there and the word was out: If you wanted to eat, you eat in the Arcade Hotel in Raleigh. That was the last place you could eat without getting out and fending for food in some backwater.

I sat there eating my dinner one evening and I saw across the room: the man. He was driving from New York to Atlanta (or vice versa), and he was teaching at Atlanta University at that time. So I said, This is my chance. I got him all to myself and I'm going to make the most of it.

So, pulling myself up and taking all the courage I had (I was all of twenty-three at the time, or something like that), I went over to him. He was eating or reading, and I said, "Dr. Du Bois, my name is John Hope Franklin." I wanted him to hear "John Hope, John Hope"—I was named for his best friend. He didn't even act like I was in the room. He was reading and eating.



A conversation with John Hope Franklin. Courtesy of Columbia University Press.

That's one down, I got two to go. I said, "I am a graduate of Fisk University, Class of 1935." That's the most clannish crowd, those Fisk graduates. I know, I can name most of them. Charles Wesley's class and other classes, we just know them all. We were familiar with them. I knew he was the Class of 1888. Everybody, all Fisk people, knew that. Not a word, not a word.

Then finally I said to him (this is all I got left), "I am a graduate student at Harvard University in the field of history and I am now working on my doctoral dissertation." Without even looking up to see what I was or who I was or how I was, he said, "How do you do?"

Later when I got to know Du Bois quite well, I reminded him of that and I asked him, "Why did you do that?" He said, "Well, you know I am very shy." And he also said, "You know I am also always very preoccupied." And that was all. That was his explanation. It was a very good lesson for me. I didn't tell him this: I said that night, when he wouldn't even look at me, wouldn't even speak to me, I said, "If I write ten less books, I will never treat a graduate student like that." I've tried to keep that promise to myself.

But this had nothing to do with my deep respect for him, my esteem for the man and

the mind. He remained the icon. No bad manners of his could get around the fact that he was one of the great minds of our time. I greatly admired and respected him then as I do now, and I think that that was generally true.

You see, we didn't have multitudes of people to look up to, but people like Du Bois and later [E. Franklin] Frazier and later [Alain] Locke and Oliver Cromwell Cox and [Carter G.] Woodson, just a few others. These were our icons. These were the people we held in the highest esteem. When one of them came to Fisk's campus you couldn't get near the place a half hour before they were scheduled to speak. It was just jam-packed because they meant so much to all of us. We continue to hold these people in the highest esteem. They were the great intellectuals. They were the ones telling us how to go, what to do, how to husband our time and how to organize for the future and how to remain courageous and strong in the face of the most unmitigated insults and degradation. It took a lot to withstand that type of experience. They helped us do it and so we thought a great deal of them.

MM: From Slavery to Freedom has been a kind of core text in the canon of African-American thought for half a century. How did

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you become committed to the life of the mind of the historian of the black experience? And how did you write—why did you write—From Slavery to Freedom?

JHF: Let me say my commitment at the outset was not to African-American history but to history. I had a mentor at Fisk, a white man by the name of Theodore Currier. He was the chair of the department of history. He was a young man, just twelve years older than I was when I entered Fisk, and just a remarkable teacher. First of all, I went to Fisk to be a lawyer. I just couldn't wait to get back to practice law with my father. You see, I recognized the fact that he was a good lawyer. (Here I was at sixteen making a judgment.) But he was not a good businessman, because we were always poor. What he needed was a partner who was not only versed in the law but who was tough and who could get those bills out to clients and get that money and pay for that mortgage, especially when we lost our house my first year at Fisk. I was just determined.

But it was this professor at Fisk who came into our course in contemporary civilization and he gave a couple of lectures and I said, "That was pretty good." And I said, "I better take a course with him." That was my un-

doing. I took a course and I forgot I was going to study law. I was so fascinated with the study of history. It was the study of history per se.

When I went to Cambridge—Harvard University—and I was going to study history, I was going to study British history. I got to Harvard and I found that if you studied Turkish history, you went to Turkey. If you studied British history, you went to Britain. And how was I ever going to get to Britain? It was much more out of the question in 1936–1937 than going to the moon is now. Anyway, where in the world is England? It's over there somewhere. Although I was terribly interested in British history, I said I better just let it alone.

Then I got interested in the beginnings of Christian socialism. And then I learned that [another scholar] had finished his work on that subject and was publishing a book on it. I said, "Well, that's not for me either. I can't make a mark there."

Then I remembered a paper I did in college on the free Negro in the antebellum South, just a general term paper. I remembered that and said, "Maybe there's something there." That's how I got interested in anything with respect to African Americans and their history. [As] I pushed towards the end of my

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residence work at Harvard, I decided I'd like to get into that. So I looked around and then I decided to write my dissertation on free Negroes in North Carolina. That aroused my interest in [the] African-American experience generally. There had not been a great deal at Fisk on the subject. So I didn't have a course in African-American history. If you can keep this to yourself, I have never had a course in African-American history.

By the time I got into the history of free Negroes in North Carolina, I did begin to spread out and see this was a very engaging field. But I never put my foot altogether in that field because I began to define it differently from what some other people might. You see, I don't think there is any such thing such as American history without African-American history. You can't talk about the history of the United States without talking about African Americans. They are a part of it. All this talk about, "Now we'll do African-American history. . . ." We've done it already and I insist on that.

One of the things I've tried to do as I have branched out and I have looked at the whole field, I have dragged along United States history with me. Sometimes I write about white people primarily, as in *Militant South* or as in *Southern Odyssey*. On the question of *The Militant South*, when it came out [there was] all this hustle and bustle undercover (which

I've now discovered in the manuscripts at the Huntington Library) of: "Franklin! What's Franklin doing writing about us?" I think I can write about them because they are us and we are they. I mean we all are one in the effort to make this country strong, great, whatever. So I saw there were these big gaps and this lack of understanding and knowledge of one part of the history of this country and that was the part we call African-American history. So I began to focus on that and make honest the entire field of American history. That's what I've tried to do in all of these efforts over the years.

I wish I could say I woke up one morning and had a great vision of writing the whole history of my people. That sounds good, except that's not the way it happened. I got a letter from Alfred Knopf's senior college editor, Roger Shugg, saying, "We'd like to publish a history of Negroes" (as they said at that time) "and we understand you are the person to do it." And they had done a lot of asking around. They had written Schlesinger at Harvard and some of them nominated me. And so they came after me and I said, "No, thank you. I'm busy."

I was working on *The Militant South* at the time. I told him what I was doing, hoping they'd say, "Well, that's fine, we'd like to publish that." They didn't say anything like that. They came back with the argument that

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while "this is a great subject you have, and it will be good at anytime, but the thing we need now is a history of Negroes in the United States. And we wish you'd reconsider."

Then he came down to see me. I was living and teaching at the North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham and he came down there and talked me into it. He literally talked me into it. He offered me an advance on royalties—\$500—and I was just swept off my feet. It was at that point that I really thought I was an author. I had arrived, you see: I got an advance on royalties. I accepted his offer and then I went off to write.

I began in the fall of 1945, just sort of looking around, and I found there was no model. I knew the [Carter G.] Woodson book and, while it was a valiant effort, it was not my kind of book. By that time, I knew Mr. Woodson, too. I had gone to the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History for the first time in 1936 and met Woodson there and admired him greatly for what he was doing—a remarkable man, tremendously devoted to this cause.

But there was no model. Then I was just stumbling around, just reading the shelves, and I found some other things. There is a very important segment of history, literature, folklore, anthropology, that dates from about 1875 to 1915 or 1920—books that were written by blacks in defense in themselves. It was almost sad. White people were writing books about the Negro beast and this sort of thing and they were trying to answer them—black intellectuals. Crogman down in Atlanta and then even Booker T. Washington took a hand in writing the story of the Negro. Either he wrote or it is rumored that someone wrote it for him. It's rumored that Robert Andrew Park. . . .

MM: Robert Park did write that.

JHF: But there were not any models. But then I ran into a book that was written earlier in this period in 1882 by a man named George Washington Williams. It was two volumes, it had footnotes, appendices, bibliographical notes—in 1882!—and I was curious about him. He almost threw me off track because I got more interested in him than I got in this subject. But I put him back on the back burner and next time I was in Washington, I said to Dr. Woodson, "What's with this character George Washington Williams?" "Well, he's a very interesting man and he died before I was old enough to know anything about him," and he said, "I think he deserves a great deal of attention." And I said, "He certainly does, I think." And he said, "Why don't you write a paper on him and read it at the next meeting of the association?" Which I did. I read it and it's the first piece ever published on George Washington Williams. Later, I was to turn my attention entirely to him.

But for the moment I was working on a book that would be called *From Slavery to Freedom*. I finished it and published it in less than two years in 1947. And it celebrated its fiftieth birthday last year. I went along for the ride. It does have a life of its own. It's now in its seventh edition and we're working on the eighth edition. I will not review it because it would take a fair amount of time and, secondly, I would be more critical than it deserves in its venerable age.

MM: One of the things I feel our audience wants to talk about is your role as chair of the president's advisory board, the President's Initiative on Race. I had several questions about this. The first thing that strikes me about this is the phrase: "A National Conversation About Race." How did President Clinton approach you on this issue?

JHF: I first met the president in 1992. He was running for president at the time and I

was in Durham in North Carolina and he was coming to Durham. He was governor of Arkansas at the time. One of his advance people called me on the phone and said, "Governor Clinton would like to see you and would like to meet you. Can you be in town tomorrow and can you meet him?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll work him into my schedule." So I did and I met him the next day. It was a very interesting experience. At the same time, I met Al Gore, who was traveling with him, and both of their families. They were in this big bus. I met Hillary and Tipper the same day, and their children.

Well, he talked not about politics at all. We talked about history and I said, "Well, this man is very well read, remarkably well read." And he and Al Gore were talking about the origins of man, where civilization began; they wanted to talk about the argument for its having begun in Africa and so forth. We went on like this for forty-five minutes, like there was not a campaign going on. Finally someone said, "We are three hours late. We got to go to Wilmington." So we wrapped that up and they went on.

The next time I had an opportunity to get involved with the administration on race was when Al Gore asked me if I would manage some sessions he wanted to have on race at the vice president's residence in Washington. He said, "I want to have it, but you're the one who knows it. And I want to give you the opportunity to lead us on." He and Tipper had three dinners, and at the end of each we would have about a two-and-a-half-hour discussion on race. They had different people there each night. He told me at one point how interested the president was in this whole matter.

Shortly after that I won the Charles Frankel Award, which was presented at the White House for my work in the humanities, and the president and I had another opportunity to talk together about this. I sent him

some books and he wrote me back profusely thanking me for them. It was clear he had read them. Then he presented, to my great astonishment, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995, and once more we had a long talk. In presenting me to the audience in the East Room, he said things about me that I had no idea he knew about: my struggles and some of the efforts I had made to do something about this race problem. He called me on that day a "prisoner of American racism." And so I knew those things about him.

He did not call me. He asked Bob Nash to call me, the head of White House personnel called me, and said, "Look, the president wants you to do this. Will you do this?" And I said, "I don't know whether I will or not." I said, "I can't say yes or no now. I have to think about it." And he said, "That's fair enough."

And so I thought about it a while. I had practical matters: First, is my health good enough to stand all this carrying on? So I went to my doctor and I talked to him about it. Then I went to my cardiologist and I talked to him. I would have talked to, if I knew then what I know now, I would have found me a psychiatrist. But back then I didn't have one.

Then I talked to my son because it was a family matter. And then I talked to a few friends confidentially and I decided that this was a remarkable opportunity. Being a historian, I knew what had happened in this field beforehand. I knew, for example, that no president of the United States had ever, without pressure on him immediately as a result of riots or something like that, had said, "Let's look at this thing and see what we can do" under relatively peaceful times, without a breathtaking, hair-raising emergency. I said, This is somewhat encouraging. The man isn't playing. He isn't playing about this, so maybe it's worth taking on.

But I knew that there would be opposition from all kinds of quarters. There'd be polit-

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ical opposition from knee-jerk politicians who wouldn't want him to have credit for anything; they would be opposed to it. Then there were people who felt that we had already done enough, you know: "What in the world do you need? You got the Civil Rights Act, you got the Voting Rights Act. Now you want something else? What else do you want?"

The president apparently felt there was something else. I thought that was worth examining, since I felt that he would be on the side of wanting something else, you see. So I decided that I would take it on, knowing full well that it was going to be a terrible physical strain, emotionally and intellectually, perhaps. Everybody is going to pick at you and pick on you. I did the best I could in trying to bury myself in the struggle of the next fifteen months and it was a remarkable experience. I would be glad to share it with you, any part of it that you want me to share.

MM: There have been a series of criticisms and controversies surrounding the President's Initiative on Race and I wondered if you could respond to four brief points.

The first criticism about the board was that its composition was flawed, because it should have included ideological conservatives such as Shelby Steele and Abigail Thernstrom or even Dinesh D'Souza, people who oppose affirmative action.

Second, there was no representation of American Indians on the advisory board and there was criticism that Native American issues were not adequately integrated into the conceptual framework or definitions of the tasks of the board.

The third criticism [is] that the White House intervened in a heavy-handed manner. There are two sources that one could cite on the board itself. [First is] Thomas Kean, a Republican former governor and a member of the advisory board, who stated for the New

York Times in September: "There is timidity on this question of race. As the year rolled on, people became, not the board but the people in the administration, became concerned. We were not encouraged to be bold. My recommendations were much bolder than anything contained in this report."

The fourth concern is the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The Monica Lewinsky scandal diverted the administration's attention and the president's attention from the vital work of the board. The example people give is how, during that fifteen-month period, the president's focus, which was wholehearted in June and July of 1997, shifted dramatically. At the first initiation of the National Conversation on Race, the president was in attendance. The first several meetings, several members of the Cabinet participated. But the last six months, no Cabinet administrator was there, even when they were talking about issues that impacted that particular department. These were some of the major criticisms and I wondered if you could respond.

JHF: You walk me through them again as we go along. The one about the composition of the board [and] the critics who make that statement . . . I am sure they have many examples of presidents of the United States who will say, "Now I am going to appoint Franklin, who is for me, and I'm going to appoint Abigail Thernstrom, who is opposed to me." Have you ever heard of a president composing a commission, a board of people, who are opposed to his position? I haven't. I never heard of that. And, if he had appointed D'Souza, he then could not have appointed John Hope Franklin. It's as simple as that.

But this notion that when a president of the United States gets ready to appoint the Federal Trade Commission or whoever or whatever, that he's going to appoint people who are in favor of him and people who are opposed to him, I don't know that's the way the

political animal works. And so why would you expect the president to appoint to a board dealing with a problem that is so controversial, so highly explosive as race—and appoint a member of the Klan and a member of the NAACP? You know, like: That's a good spread. I don't know of any example.

Of course there are some commissions which are created as bipartisan and operate in a bipartisan fashion. The law says you have so many Republicans and so many Democrats and so forth. That's understandable, because then you have to look around and find a decent Republican or a decent Democrat. I don't see that as a valid criticism.

Now with respect to the Native Americans . . .

MM: With the whole issue that happened in Denver . . .

JHF: I think it was rather unfortunate the president did not appoint a Native American. He would have had a problem appointing a Native American because, don't forget, there are over 500 tribes. He's not going to satisfy the Choctaw if he had appointed someone from the Chickasaws or whatever. But I still wish that he had appointed a Native American and then we could have fought that out about what kind of Native American and whether this was a satisfactory thing. For, after all, they were here. It's theirs. We ran over them. We've done everything conceivable to degrade and dehumanize them.

So I was for it [the appointment]. But I didn't make the appointment and I have had no explanation on it. What we tried to do as a board was to make all kinds of amends. One was to appoint as senior consultants to the board two Native Americans, then to make every effort to give them a voice. We met with Indian leaders all over this country. We didn't meet with any other group as officially. We didn't meet with African Americans as a

group. We didn't meet with Korean Americans or Hispanic Americans. We met with Native Americans more than once, not only in Denver, but in Phoenix and in San Jose. And then there were other meetings that were not regular board meetings where we met with them. So we did everything possible. We seriously considered holding a board meeting on a reservation. I think that was shot down by Native Americans themselves in the way they treated us in Denver.

We had met in Denver. I rushed to Denver, did not register at the hotel, went immediately to the area where there was a meeting with forty or fifty Indian leaders, tribal leaders, and met with them for two hours. It was a very cordial meeting. I rushed from there to register in the hotel to get a bite to eat before a public meeting at seven o'clock and Federico Peña and I were the program that night. The subject of the session was stereotypes. He was going to talk about his experiences being stereotyped in this country by non-Hispanics and how he was treated as a result.

Well, we got the impression even while he was speaking that there was some unrest because he's a favorite son and all that, but they were mumbling and grumbling. He got through this and then I was to speak and they said no, "Oh no, no." And I was not permitted to open my mouth. The American Indian Movement, I understand, a particular group of very extreme radical activist types, simply said, "You can't speak. We don't want to hear a thing you have to say." And of course that's all they had to do. I'm a peace-loving man, not combative at all. I didn't try to speak.

I thought it was unfortunate that this happened—and no one had more sympathy for the Indian cause than I. But I thought it was unfortunate that other people, especially white people, could see the two most degraded groups in this country fighting each other; the two farthest down were combating

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while someone runs off with the spoils. So I thought this was very unfortunate but there was nothing I could do about that at all. And we have a very strong recommendation in our report to the president about this question and about the need to do something in all kinds of areas, especially in the economic and education sphere and whatnot. We strongly recommended that to the president and hope he will do something. We made recommendations before our final report.

MM: The third issue is about Tom Kean and the concerns that the actual proposals themselves were too timid and not vigorous enough.

JHF: Well, Tom Kean, let me say first—I don't mean anything, I'm not trying to get back at him—Tom Kean was the only member of the president's advisory board that did not attend many meetings.

MM: He's been the most vocal critic.

JHF: Yes, he's been the most vocal critic. Now if we were under any pressure from the White House, I failed to feel it myself. He did go to the White House once when Abigail Thernstrom, when that crowd went to the White House. I was invited. I chose not to go. I go to the White House enough and I knew their line. And I didn't have time to go. They were having their day and Tom Kean [was] the only member of the Advisory Board who went that day. Now, if he felt a lot of pressure, I did not. And I don't know other members of the board who felt a lot of pressure. We spoke openly, we met the president a number of times. I met him more than some of the other members of the board and I always told him what I thought.

One day we were in the Oval Office and one of his assistants said to him, "Mr. President, your Advisory Board is really picking

up steam. They're really going to be active now." This is when we had been in existence for six months. I said, "Mr. President, I object to this line, to this interpretation of our activity." And I said, "We hit the ground running as much as we could." I said, "After all, you wouldn't expect any group to be doing in the first month of its existence what it's doing the sixth month of its existence." I said, "We were doing all right that first month." And he said, "I couldn't agree with you more." And so he left this person sort of hanging out there to dry.

Now with respect to the great, great recommendations that Tom Kean made that we didn't have, I don't know what they are. He was there when we voted on our recommendation. I think he was there. He wasn't there all that much. But I think he was there that day and, frankly, he didn't say, "This is too timid, we got to go there and shake the people up." I don't remember him saying anything like that.

So I am not going to entertain that as a valid criticism. I wish that he had been at more of the meetings and I wish that he had shared with us some of the strong feeling he had. Maybe we would have been a better board.

MM: What about the Monica Lewinsky scandal?

JHF: I don't know, let me say, first of all, we were an advisory board. We were a board advising the president. We were not a commission like the Kerner Commission. We were not an agency like the Committee on Civil Rights that advised President Truman. And we certainly did not have the power that Archbishop Tutu had in South Africa. What we did do, I think, was to look at the problems that were before us. We sought to deal with them in a manner as expeditiously and as effectively as we could. Now I didn't ex-

pect the president to attend every meeting. After all, there are a few more things in the world for him to do besides ride herd over seven people and tell them to get on the stick and get busy. He came to a meeting and he might have stayed away because of the press.

The press misrepresented the board and its position in the most remarkable and unforgivable manner. Let me give you an example. The president and the vice president came to a meeting in September, September 30th I believe it was, and we got to talking. We were all just discussing matters and we were talking about education and what we were going to try and do about education. The president made some comment about . . . He said, "Over there in Fairfax, Virginia, I understand there's a school where kids from a whole hundred language groups are there in the one school and they get along, and they are moving on, and they are studying." And he said, "This is remarkable. This is the sort of thing we ought to be interested in doing."

Well, the next day the paper said: "President Straightens Out the Board"; "President Commands the Board to Look into the Fairfax County Schools." This is true. That was the kind of interpretation the press put on it. A woman from the Associated Press called me and said, "They tell me you're about out now." She says, "What are you going to do when this is over?" and "You won't be there this time next month, will you?" And I said, "What are you talking about?" And she says,

"The president is through with this board." You see what I'm talking about?

I don't know if the president had any idea of firing us or going to get anybody else. Every time I wrote—and what this young lady didn't know is that I wrote to the president every month, made a report to him, told him what we were doing—he would write me back "Thank you very much" and throw in a comment on what we were doing. A lot of this isn't shown anywhere. He could march down there as he did at the Mayflower Hotel and sit in, and sit by me and the vice president there on the other side, and show the world that he is with the board. But that isn't getting the board anywhere. We had work to do, you know, if we were in Phoenix, or San Jose, or somewhere else. You think he has time? I don't know that he has time to come and meet with us all the time. I read the minutes of the Kerner Commission and I don't think President Johnson met with them at all. Nor did Truman meet with his board at all. Now every time we meet they expect the president of the United States to jump on a plane and be with us and deliberate with us. I don't believe that is the way a presidentially appointed commission functions anyway.

Now with respect to the other members of the administration, I can't call the roll, but I am sure that Janet Reno has been at a meeting of ours less than six months ago. Rick Riley was at our meeting so frequently that I wondered whether the Department of Education

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was doing all right. And I was glad. I said to him one time, "Rick, you came to see whether Judy [Winston]'s doing her job." She was the undersecretary of education and general counsel, and she was our executive director. We took her from the Department of Education. And I said, "You're just coming to all these meetings to be certain that Judy is all right."

I don't know that there was any great falling off. Of course, there was this burst of enthusiasm where one cabinet member after another came. Donna Shalala came and Andrew Cuomo came and the secretary of education, and so forth. And they got their word in and talked to us, but I didn't expect them to attend every board meeting—why should they attend every board meeting? And there were other people there. There were all kinds of people from the federal government and all that. When we got to talk about housing, we needed certain housing specialists and they came. When we were talking about crime and the administration of justice, we had people from the Department of Justice. Janet Reno was there for that and other people. And that wasn't six months ago. I don't know where this comes from.

MM: You've gone through this experience with the initiative, you've studied the life and the historical experience of blacks. What we've had to confront in this country fundamentally is a system of racial inequality. Can racism be dismantled in this country, based on your experience? How optimistic are you that we can triumph over racism?

JHF: I am cautiously optimistic. But if I were not optimistic, I would jump out the window or something because I couldn't stand it. I believe in the redemption of man, the rehabilitation of man. I believe that it is entirely possible to overcome the awful, awful difficulties we've had in this country.

The institution of racism was carefully constructed by man and that which he built I think can be dismantled. I think it will take a long time and I am willing to fight the long haul. The historian is not of the opinion that this will happen in his lifetime. And we need more historians among us, a more historical-minded people among us. I saw people who would come up to me at the end of six months and say, "Well, how's it coming? You still working on this? I thought it ought to be over, it ought to be finished by now."

If you lived in 1940 and you've lived in 1998, you could see that it's not the same. This country is not the same. It is not the same as it was a decade ago, minus some awful things. You see when the man was killed in Jasper, Texas, and dragged all over and that awful, brutal inhuman thing, and some people suggested we ought to go and have a board meeting in Jasper—if we're going to have a board meeting every time somebody is killed or demonized or dehumanized or whatever, we not only would meet all over the country, we would be meeting every day.

So let's put things in perspective. What we try to do is get fewer Jasper, Texas, incidents. And they are fewer than they were in the beginning of this century, anyway. You look at the lynching statistics in 1900 and look at them in 1998 and they aren't the same. They aren't the same. They're fewer. I am not boasting about it. Every scratch that anyone gets as a result of inhuman and indecent treatment, it breaks my heart—don't get me wrong. But there just aren't as many as there were 100 years ago and I don't think there will be as many 100 years from now. But the job—ours—is to make certain that we do everything we can to eliminate it, to put it behind us, to create a society of absolute equality, absolute fairness, absolute justice. If we all do that, it will be a better world.