

Oral History Interview

With

Truman Gibson

Chief Civilian Advisor to the Secretary of War, 1943-1946; Member, President's Advisory Commission on Universal Training, 1946-1947.

Independence, Missouri

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By Carol Briley

BRILEY: Truman can you tell me your birthdate, and where you were born.

GIBSON: I was born on January 22, 1912, in Atlanta, Georgia.

BRILEY: Do you want to say something about your parents?

GIBSON: Yes. My father was in the insurance business in Atlanta, and had met my mother, obviously earlier, when she was teaching in Virginia. My father was on a lecture tour, having graduated from Harvard in nineteen nine (1909). The persons responsible for his going to Harvard were W.E.B DuBois, who was his teacher at Atlanta University, and the wife of the leading black citizen in Atlanta, Mrs. [Adrienne] Herndon. Mr. [Alonzo Franklin] Herndon owned a barbershop that catered to white patrons. Herndon always impressed me because he would go to Florida for the winter and give us grapefruit and lettuce upon return. But the anomaly of going from Georgia to Florida for the winter didn't occur to me until later on.

My father was brought back to Atlanta by Mrs. Herndon, later on, because Mr. Herndon had organized an insurance company, Atlanta Mutual. My father was the first debit collector, manager. Atlanta Mutual later developed into Atlanta Life, which became one of the largest black companies in the country.

After my father's rise in Atlanta, in I guess about nineteen (1919) or in the early twenties, he decided he would leave the south, Atlanta, and go north. So he organized an old-line legal reserve company in Columbus, Ohio. We moved to Columbus, thereafter.

But the first years in Atlanta were pleasant years. We went to Oligarch school, which was run by little ladies from Massachusetts and the north, and it was connected with Atlanta University. We got a good start in school, and I was in the sixth grade when we moved to Columbus.

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My mother had been a teacher in Jersey City before going to Virginia to teach. And she was at a school run by an archdeacon who was her uncle. So their meeting was the result of my father being on a lecture tour and my mother being the teacher.

BRILEY: Did you move to Chicago after Columbus?

GIBSON: Oh yes. We moved to Chicago. I had a scholarship at Northwestern University. I did not know really anything about my father's activities in organizing his company.

All I knew was, he was away a great deal. But I was very active in everything at East High School in Columbus, and I did not really know too much about his plans to leave Columbus to go to Chicago.

I had already been admitted to Northwestern. I went to Northwestern in the fall of twenty-nine (1929). The head of the black YMCA in Evanston and the Spring Street Y in Columbus, had called on my father. It was a gloomy and cold day. And he advised me to think very carefully about going to Northwestern because the racial attitude there was worse than Columbus, Ohio.

In the meantime, my parents had moved to Chicago. They had taken up residence on Michigan Avenue; so I decided to apply to the University of Chicago. I did apply, and was accepted, and went to the university.

BRILEY: What subjects did you study and what was your undergraduate degree?

GIBSON: I received a Bachelor of Philosophy degree. But early in my second year, I took a course in Political Science with an assistant professor, named Harold Gosnell, who had been working on a study of the Negro in Chicago politics. Several people that I had met, including Horace Katen and others, had recommended me to Gosnell, because he had a vacancy on his staff for a research assistant.

So I started working for Gosnell for a dollar, later a dollar-and-a-half--an hour, which was not insubstantial in those days. That job lasted until I finished law school. But the work consisted of my interviewing black politicians, and covering political meetings, those meetings being a source of considerable activity before the days of television.

The meetings were spirited, the competition was intense--some meetings were amusing and were some serious. In the course of covering meetings (I suppose, I must have been in my sophomore

year) I was covering a meeting at the Eighth Regiment Armory--William L. Dawson was running for alderman. He was running against a man by the name of William E. King. And the competition, Mr. Dawson, had just deserted the Republican Party and gone to the Democrats.

King was the leading Republican and the competition was fierce and intense. In those days, answers were given to questions raised in the other camp immediately; so there was no lapse of time.

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I was taking notes on one of Dawson's speeches and people started looking at me queerly. They saw me taking notes. I was in the balcony and someone got word to Dawson, who said, "I understand there is a spy in the house and let him come down, we'll make him comfortable."

So, instead of getting into a physical confrontation, which I did not want—I was embarrassed-- I went downstairs and Dawson and I became friendly. And I started working in his law office when I graduated from law school.

That was back when I was also active in many things at the university. But this work with Gosnell consumed a lot of time. (I understand that Gosnell did a book on Truman). He ended up teaching at Howard and died at one-hundred-and-one years of age. Gosnell was very considerate and very kind to me when I was in college. And I graded the exam books in the class that I was attending with him.

BRILEY: So, did these experiences impact upon your decision to attend law school?

GIBSON: Well to be absolutely candid, I didn't really have too much pressure to go to law school.

During the summers, I would sell life insurance for Supreme Liberty. My first summer selling insurance was spent in Detroit, at the height of the depression. I was canvassing door-to-door, and I decided whatever I did would be easier than selling life insurance. So I immediately decided not to continue work in that area. The law was really an outlet more than a direction.

BRILEY: My notes indicate that you practiced law in Chicago, from 1935 until about 1940. Were there any particular cases, or anything else that stands out in your mind that might be of interest?

GIBSON: Well, there were two factors, two areas-- I worked very closely with a lawyer in the Dawson office by the name of Irvin Mollison, who was later a Federal judge for the U.S. Customs Court. He represented Julian Black, a big real estate holder, who later became Joe Louis's manager.

So I am busy working away for Dawson and Mollison, and this big—not too big—guy would come in with Julian. And this guy, who would sit with me and eat an apple (and talk, but not talk

too much) was Joe Louis. I had never had any interest, or knowledge, of prizefighters, but he talked about his life.

Joe had started out working on a Ford Lincoln line in Detroit, and he had been in Brewster Center. He knew that I had worked in Detroit; so we had a relationship. He was very friendly.

At the same time, Irv Mollison, and Earl Dickerson (who was the chief legal officer for Supreme Liberty Life), Loring B. Moore and Julian LaFontant (LaFontant's daughter, Jewel S. LaFontant-Mankarious, was the first female Deputy Solicitor General under Nixon) and myself, [4]

represented a Carl Hansberry. Carl had moved into an area covered by a restricted covenant agreement in a Washington Park subdivision area in Chicago--on the south side adjacent to the University of Chicago. And it developed that the University of Chicago backed the white owners' association in keeping the area covered by the Washington Park restricted covenant agreement active.

Carl moved into the restricted area, bought a place, and was evicted. Whereupon he filed suit, and we represented him in the Lee-Hansberry restricted covenant case. That suit went on for four years and ended up in the US Supreme Court, where we won the case.

Well that was the big case, and being the junior member of the organization, I had to dig up the names of all of the restricted covenant signers, check the records of ownership, and establish that more than seventy-five percent of the owners had not signed the agreement. So that was drudgery being at the low end of the totem pole, and that fell to me. We weren't paid, and it took a lot of time and energy.

BRILEY: Did you have any other jobs before you went into government?

GIBSON: Oh, yes.

BRILEY: ...or did you leave Chicago and go straight to Washington D.C.?

GIBSON: No, in thirty-eight [1938], a group organized an exposition, [the American Negro Exposition, July 4-September 2, 1940], the seventy-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. It started out as an individual group of people who were in several organizations. Then it became political and it was sponsored by the state of Illinois, and by the U.S. Government. The man that had organized the activity was sincere and earnest, but was a poor administrator.

So a lawyer, who later became a judge with whom I was very close, decided I should head the organization. And that was a change of politics, because the lawyer was Wendell [E.] Green who ran the Negro part of the Roosevelt campaign.

So I was working with Wendell Green, working for Roosevelt, then working for the exposition.

The exposition proceeded. We had an art exhibit of a very substantial nature headed by a chap from Howard. We had a diorama indicating the progress of Negroes since the landing of Jamestown.

Henry Wallace was a very active participant. Duke Ellington was our music director. Langston Hughes developed Times of Normandy (?) and the Black Mikado. It was a very active operation.

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During the process, I renewed an acquaintanceship with Bill Trent, who was working in the Department of the Interior under [Harold] Ickes. Bill's father and my father had been friends in Atlanta. His father had been secretary of the YMCA. There are several pictures of us completely nude as babies. [Laughter].

Anyway, we had all of the people from Washington. We had a lot of exhibits that developed. I met Bob Weaver. But Bill [Trent] also spent a lot of time in Chicago.

So with that background, and with the exposition and with the knowledge of Bill and Bob, we went to Washington to prepare for the Supreme Court argument.

One of the chaps in Howard Law School had been a very close friend at the University of Chicago Law School. And this friend insisted that we make a presentation to the students at Howard, the day before the Supreme Court hearing. And it was then that I met Bill [Judge William H.] Hastie, through this friend Bob May (who worked on the Brown vs. the Board of Education case).

May had been a member of court [?] at the University of Chicago, and Bernard [S.] Jefferson (a Harvard Law graduate who taught at Howard) and James [M.] Nabret, Jr. (who had been a member of court [?]) from Northwestern. We had a poker playing group--a friendly group.

And then I went back to Chicago. It was not long after that Bill Hastie called and said that he had been named Civilian Aid to the Secretary of War and would like me to come out and join him. And everything seemed to coalesce. That's how I happened to get to Washington.

I had no knowledge of the military, no interest except that Ben Davis [Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.], who was later a lieutenant general, lived with us in Chicago in the year that he had to put in before Congressman Oscar DePriest [R-Ill] could nominate him for the US Military Academy. So we developed a close friendship. Ben was a brilliant student. He helped my sister with algebra and other things that she had missed in coming from Columbus to Chicago. She skipped a grade as did my brother, so he helped her.

And that was interesting, because to jump, many, many years, I called Ben to congratulate him on the fourth star President Clinton gave him for the indignities he suffered at West Point. And he asked how Harry was doing--my brother.

And I said, “Well, I called to tell you two things, first to congratulate you, and to tell you Harry died.

Ben said, “Well I know that, but tell him I said hello.”

And I said, “Ben, Harry died.”

Ben said, “I heard you. Tell him hey.”
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And I said, “I hope you tell him before I do.”

He then he asked how Alberta was doing with her arithmetic. He was beginning in Alzheimer’s.

But he was very close to us earlier, and we heard from him constantly, while he was at West Point, where all these events happened to him. That was my only exposure to the military, which wasn’t too good.

BRILEY: So, did he write you letters from West Point?

GIBSON: Yes, he wrote constantly. He wrote my mother.

BRILEY: Do you still have the letters?

GIBSON: My mother had them, and I have no idea where they went. I don’t think my sister knows. I had a number of letters--but he wrote my mother fairly constantly.

BRILEY: So did you view going to Washington DC as an exciting opportunity, or were you torn with that decision?

GIBSON: I wasn’t too torn because mostly my law work had been with the Hansberry case. I had some things with Julian Black, because Irv Mollison had left shortly after the restricted covenant case to serve in the U.S. Customs Court. But it wasn’t too tough to leave. It was kind of in an in-between-state at that time. I wasn’t too anxious to go to Washington. But it was an opportunity, and it was different and strange. The pay wasn’t great in those days.

BRILEY; That’s right, it wouldn’t have been good in those days.

GIBSON: Thirty-eight hundred dollars a year.

BRILEY: And so you entered the War Department as Assistant to the Civilian Aide. Is that right?

Gibson: That is correct. Yes.

BRILEY: And can you tell us about some of the individuals that you worked with, and any memorable experiences of that?

GIBSON: Yes. I maintained a close relationship with Julian Black. We started, really, back in the law practice days. Julian and a number of fellow numbers backers had developed an interest in the oil fields in Centralia, Illinois. I had met the oil drilling developers who were really hustlers.

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We would go to Centralia every weekend. So it was for them, I guess--getting away. And they enjoyed going down there. It was a long ride. And we got maybe a gallon of oil. But these guys got to Irv Mollison who took a lease on a drainage ditch and made a lot of money.

But Julian and I kept close. And shortly after I went to Washington, he called about Joe Louis and the Army, because the draft was hot on Joe's heels. And I met him several times. I guess I had gone to Washington, but the association with Julian had started earlier, and kept on after I went to Washington. So when I went, one of the big issues was what about Joe Louis. Because with Joe, we decided that he should volunteer for the service, and not be drafted.

So with that background I went, and I had different associations in my career with Bill Hastie, who had been scholarly and intellectual.

And I had been to police courts. And I had represented Julian and Joe when their trainer became involved in killing a young little girl while he was drunk. But all those things have been in my background.

We worried about Louis. We decided during conversations with Mike Jacobs, who was then the promoter at the Twentieth Century Sporting Club--they were the club that put on all the major fights, to have two major fights: one for Army relief, and one for Navy relief. This was almost concurrent to my going in Washington.

So we got everything set up. The first fight was the Army relief fight with Abe Simon. So Mike [Jacobs] gave me fifty tickets to distribute to the Army in the War Department, which I did.

Next door to us, in the old munitions building was General George Marshall's office--not that I ever saw General Marshall. But Marshall's aid was a young Lieutenant, Otto [L.] Nelson, Jr., who had been a West Point graduate, and also had a Harvard MBA. He was a whiz at organization, and so forth.

There wasn't too much pressure during the year before Pearl Harbor, and Otto would come next door and talk, and I gave him the fifty tickets for the War Department, which he distributed to General Marshall. Marshall had a big party before the fight, which didn't include me. But it did get the attention of some of the people. They knew absolutely nothing about blacks, and had no

contact of any kind. So that of a sort was the beginning of an important relationship for Bill and myself.

Then Joe went to Raleigh where he was in the last horse cavalry basic training course. And he started these almost daily calls.

Later he went into a series of exhibitions, with almost every post, camp, and station with the then Black champions who were in the service: [Sugar] Ray Robinson, and Sandy Saddler the feather weight champion of the world.

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The beginning of our relationship with helping and receiving information was when Jackie Robinson, the great baseball star, got into what developed to be a serious situation on the drill field. He was in the last stages of officer candidate training.

Robinson was standing by a black soldier when a white officer insulted a black soldier. The officer said, "You stupid nigger son-of-a-bitch, I told you...."

And Jackie said, "Now just a minute sir, that man is a soldier in the U.S. Army."

The officer said, "Screw you nigger, that goes for you too." And Jackie then knocked all of the officer's teeth out.

So with that situation Joe called and said, "Get out here, right away."

I said, "Wait,...."

And, Joe said, "Get out! Don't ask, and don't argue."

So General Davis, at that time, handling all of Roosevelt's problems and our problems, had been made Commanding General of the second Cavalry Brigade which was destined for extinction. It only lasted about two years after he got there. All of the horse cavalry units were being phased out.

But anyway, General Davis made an appointment with the Commanding General of the post. Joe and I went in. And Joe was just--I almost said humble-- because he was very ingratiating. He thanked the general for his treatment at Fort Bragg. He gave him a Piaget watch so that the general could remember him. He sent a case of cooled champagne to his quarters.

And Joe then said, "Incidentally, we have a serious problem, General, with Jackie Robinson. We would like very much to let him go ahead and get his commission."

So Jackie did, and Joe bought a uniform for every member of the graduating class that arrived. And that presaged Joe spending a quarter-of-a-million dollars on soldiers during his four years in the Army.

But anyway, wherever Joe went, he would call. I remember one call from Fort Bragg saying that the Army had really solved the Jim Crow problem of buses down there.

I said, "How Joe."

He said, "Well, they don't let us on the same bus with white boys."

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So I went to Judge [Robert P.] Patterson, who was a legislator, and told him what had happened to Joe, and he said that was impossible. He called in two generals, political generals, from the South, who echoed his sentiments that it couldn't happen.

So I said, "Well, Judge why don't you call the Commanding General at Fort Bragg, and see what actually did happen?"

Well it did happen. Patterson was livid and he issued an order eliminating all segregated buses on Army posts, camps and stations. And that was part of what Joe accomplished. And he went on overseas.

He went to England and found whole towns off limits to Black troops. We called, and that was the beginning of our relationship with Lieutenant General John C. H. Lee, who was Robert E. Lee's grandson.

General Lee, when he discovered the activities of these generals, immediately broke them and sent them back to the United States.

But Joe [Louis] got the Legion of Merit, and his work in the Army is publicly unknown. He did a tremendous job.

So we chipped away putting out the little fires when they came up. But developing no real change in basic Army policy.

Bill [Hastie] made an issue of the Air Force—[Army] Air Corps then. He indicated that he was resigning in protest because there had been no change in attitudes. And there had not been.

But in the meantime, Mary [McLeod] Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt were together making life miserable for the President who pushed and resolved when he got the ninety-ninth squadron [Tuskegee Airmen] started, as I indicated last night.

And there was a change. But no basic change.

There was a committee of all the assistant chiefs of staff, headed by the same Otto Nelson, who I had met the first week in Washington in the Munitions Building.

He knew the Army point of view and the Army policy, and knew it was wrong. But he said, "You can't change these people by yelling at them, and they are certainly not going to be moved by any social protest."

It was frustrating in a sense because you had killings.

And you had the basic Army view, as General Marshall constantly reiterated that the Army was not a sociological laboratory. You cannot change the attitudes of the community.

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The only problem is the Army took those views to Maine, to Massachusetts, and to England.

So we constantly just put out the fires--and the riots in the South. The attitudes of the civilian population was to keep these people in their places, and to not get any ideas, in particular these boys from the North.

You had the constant carping criticism from the Negro press, which again was concentrating on the killings and the attitudes. They objected to the fact the Army did not take a strong position in the communities for the protection of their troops.

And on the other hand, you had Eleanor Roosevelt and Mother Bethune on the Air Force --that was their particular province.

And all of the training facilities, with few minor exceptions--Fort Devens, Massachusetts-- were in the South. So that you had all these constant community problems.

And then with the Army policy of complete segregation--you had troops coming in, individuals coming in with no education at all--and just thrown in. It was a mix that was destined for failure.

On the other hand, you had Ralph Bunche, who had been an outstanding athlete at UCLA and a professor who wanted to get into the OSS. But he couldn't because of his color.

It was frustrating, at the time because these instances were happening everyday, somewhere. And Bill was probably right, you put out the brush fires, but you don't put out the fire.

I didn't think the issue would be solved by any fell swoop. But, the attitudes of the Black community were interesting. Something that used to work for IBC [International Boxing Club], some of the young guys there would say: we don't understand why you want to be included. I said, "Well that would be a difficult thing for you to understand."

But the fight, really, was best exemplified by the Pittsburgh Courier, which had a slogan 'Double V,' "Victory at home, and Victory abroad."

And victory at home meant victory over segregation. And they couldn't understand how people would fight to get in to be abused. But that was the case at that time we had no real opposition to the war effort. Maybe on the communist side.

I had a good friend in Chicago, Ishmael Flory who is still living incidently. He was fighting abroad, and infact, he had some medical work done in Russia.

But you had that slight minority group that were fighting the war effort--not too strenuously, because when the Soviet Union got in, that element disappeared.

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Most of the fights were for inclusion, and there was no notion of exclusion, which, I guess, was difficult for all those outside the United States to understand.

BRILEY: Well, you must have ran across key historical figures at that time. Did you ever meet Eleanor Roosevelt?

GIBSON: I was on a plane with her once. As a matter of fact, it was shortly after the order – McCormack, one of my bosses was responsible for, for the movement of all the Japanese. But my only contacts with her were through Mrs. Bethune, but she was very evident. She, really more than anybody, really, because Mrs. Bethune fought the Air Force, or, the Air Corps.

BRILEY: Do you have any stories about Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune?

GIBSON: Oh, many, many stories. I've known her since she headed the NYA. She was a striking figure with completely white hair. She helped a lot of people-- kids in the Chicago area-- through the National Youth Administration. And when we went to Washington, she would talk about the problems, and the consultations, and that was not really the intellectual attitude. But she was very practical and said, "Time will tell, you keep working." And she did. And she never let up.

BRILEY: Did you ever meet with Franklin Roosevelt?

GIBSON: Never, never.

BRILEY: I know there are other gentlemen that you met in the White House because you mentioned John Ohly, and we have his papers. So if you could just tell us something about Mr. Ohly.

GIBSON: Yeah, John Ohly. Jack was kind of a shadowy figure. Very close. He was really running Army personnel. In the sense that when I got a promotion. Jack Ohly was responsible. But Jack was very close to (he had gone to one of those eastern universities) or he had a good friend who was the brother of Ellison Davis. And Jack and Davis were very, very close.

I knew him socially because of his relationship with Davis, who was a Ph.D. and a teacher. I don't know where he and Jack had known each other. But I think it was at Amherst.

Then there were some strange figures in the War Department at that time. Chuck Dailey, who headed the Carnegie Foundation, was very close to Jack O'Lear and to John Davis. Chuck, and his group, and Jack Ohly were with General Osborne who had been in one of the foundations and was given a general's commission from some service. That group put pressure on General Lee.

So Jack was really circulating around in ways--and you can't ever put a finger on it—exactly what he was. Except I knew he was handling Army personnel. I knew him principally through

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John Davis. John Davis was the brother of Ellison Davis, who was the first black professor at the University of Chicago, an imminent sociologist.

BRILEY: Did you meet Henry L. Stimson? And I know you know Patterson?

GIBSON: Oh yes, I was in constant contact with Judge Patterson. But Stimson I met when we had the Negro publishers in to meet him and to meet General Marshall, then and when I was decorated. Those were the two occasions when I had contact with Mr. Stimson and I had one memorandum from him.

But Judge Patterson really ran the War Department. Judge Patterson was extremely busy, but always and constantly available and horrified by constant attacks. I know that he did not agree with General Marshall's attitudes, but he was in no position to do anything because he knew he wouldn't get any backing from President Roosevelt.

A group of easterners, who had known Stimson—[John] McCloy, Howard C. Peterson who was ultimately a Secretary in the War Department--were all very approachable.

I know this chap that just died in Washington--Davidson who was the assistant to McCloy. He actually went with him when he went to the World Bank and to Germany.

But Davidson and I were extremely close. As a matter of fact, before going to the World Bank, he came to Chicago and was interviewed at the University of Chicago.

But those were very sympathetic people.

McCloy was difficult. I don't know what his real views were. I know he was responsible for the Japanese expulsion from the West Coast. He was never warm, but always available to talk about problems.

The only social contact I had with him was when there was an affair in Pittsburgh, sponsored by the Pittsburgh Courier. We were set up to welcome the then 99th Pursuit Squadron. They flew overland to Pittsburgh, and they were about eight hours late getting in. We had long talks with

McCloy, and there was never any feeling of warmth. The only common basis on which I approached him was the effective utilization of the military asset. Those were the magic words with him.

Then going on to Europe, he would send letters out. He was cooperative, but not warm.

BRILEY: You were on the Commission on Universal Military Training. I believe there were six or eight sessions held at the White House?

[General] Harry Vaughan [President Truman's military aide] talks about these sessions in his oral history. He remembers all the people from that commission coming to the White House. He [13]

said that they were very prominent individuals and worked very hard. Vaughan said he couldn't believe that those people would take that much time off work even to devote to a cause, even if it was a worthwhile cause. Do you remember going to the White House for those meetings?

GIBSON: Oh, yes. We met on weekends, I think, over a two-month period. The President [Harry S. Truman] sat in on a number of meetings. And he was not only interested in the military aspect of the training, but I think his primary interest was training youth.

GIBSON: In talking about the Universal Military Training Commission, I would like to make one confession for the first time. That, when I was asked to serve, I was flattered. The President wrote a letter, which flattered me even more.

But when I went, with my background in the War Department, I had a feeling of real disgust with the attitudes that had then existed, and which had not completely changed. Despite the Gillem Report [Lieutenant General Alvin C. Gillem] and other reports that indicated the problem—there was never the willingness to face up to the real problem, which was segregation.

I was not just thrilled to death to be talking about any kind of military training with existing Army attitudes at that time--but the attitudes were beginning to change.

This is after General [John C. H.] Lee had done what he did in Europe [organized emergency desegregated combat units during the Battle of the Bulge], which caused the Supreme Commander to fire him. This also underscored the intransigence of the military attitude. And added to the fact that the commission consisted of such impressive people from impressive backgrounds such as Sam Rosenman, who had been President Roosevelt's speechwriter, Anna Rosenberg, later Secretary of Defense, Father Walsh from Georgetown, Dan Poling, and, of course the chairman, Karl Compton.

I was a little out of my depth with those people. I had been dealing with people of a slightly different calibers and smaller wars. And then when the President would come in, I was just awed.

In the first place I was shocked that he would have the attitudes that he had. He had a very sly sense of humor, as I remember, and he sat in on many of our sessions.

In one session we discussed the need for the development of universal military training, with the necessity of it for the military establishment, and particularly the intelligence wing.

All the doors were locked. We were told before the session to go to the bathroom, or whatever.

And the President was looking at it, and we had this procession of generals there who were talking profoundly. And the President said, "Well, what area are you talking about, what years?" Well it developed in the years of 1930 to 1939.

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The President, well he never said anything, but I thought, "Well, that's my kind of man. He understood." Then it became evident that the President would not tolerate any segregation, in any report.

So we started out on that basis. And that became interesting.

I was still not completely convinced. This had nothing to do with the individuals on the commission, because Dan Poling, was friendly and receptive, as was Father Walsh. We went to the Harriman House. Joe Davies, off his mission in Moscow was on the commission. He invited Rosenman and myself up to have lunch. After all of us had been awarded the Medal for Merit, and had all been given Cardeau pens, we went in and saw the Easter eggs and I said, "God where am I?" [Laughter]

But the President brought everything down to reality. And this is the truth, although it doesn't sound completely like it, when he called Rosenman, Anna Rosenberg and myself to his desk in the Oval Office. And there he called me his namesake. Although his first name is Harry, and I said, "Well how in the hell did he know that?"

He then proceeded to say what his real beliefs were about protection from physical violence--Jim Crow trains. And then with real expression he said to Sam Rosenman and Anna, "You don't understand Jim Crow trains like Truman and I do."

So I said, "This is a man that really is sincere, in the sense that he doesn't really care what other people think. He has his own beliefs."

And I was dealing with Sam Rosenman that night, one of only three times in three months. Rosenman says, "You know, I have to tell you, 'you've been with a very big man today.' Roosevelt would never approach him on his beliefs."

So I said, well, that's something. But that is the beginning of my real knowledge about the President. He had these deep feelings, and he didn't really care what other people thought, or what the public thought, because his expressions--as surfaced—if measured by the Gallop Poll

and other polls would not have been the views of ordinary Americans—or many Americans at all.

And he said, particularly with respect to the blinding of the Negro sergeant [Isaac Woodard], “Enough is enough. Dammit I’m going to do something immediately.”

And that impressed me. So that when people like General [Colin] Powell who are prominent say that his actions were dictated by politics, they don’t really understand the man and what he did, and why he did it. Enough with the preaching.

BRILEY: Do you have any memories of Anna Rosenberg that you would like to share?

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GIBSON: Yes, she was active. Again slightly remote, but a fine lady. She was later assistant secretary of defense.

I had a fellow working for me who was a Major in the Marine Corp. He wanted to escape service. So I said, “Well, ask her if you can be stationed in Washington.”

She said, “Don’t even finish your sentence. [Laughter]. So she was congenial. And that was about the time she was being wooed by Paul Hoffman, the head of Studebaker. And she later married him.

She was interesting. She and Sam Rosenman and I were the only ones with the President and she had no comment afterwards. That impressed me and struck me as interesting.

BRILEY: How did you feel when you received the Medal of Merit from the President? Was that a surprise or did you...

GIBSON: Oh, It was a complete shock. They didn’t have the Rose Garden ceremonies then, but I got a call to be in Stimson’s office. Stimson had in the meantime resigned. I had a good friend who was in army public relations. And he said, “You’ve got to be there,” but he did not tell me why.

And my wife and daughter came, and it made my throat choke up a little. But I didn’t know that Stimson really cared one way or another. But yes I was surprised--shocked.

BRILEY: You should be very proud of that commendation, it was really very complimentary.

GIBSON: Yes it was.

BRILEY: Let’s move on to some of the people that you knew from the White House staff that were more involved in Civil Rights. We’ll get away from the War Department. Did you know David Niles?

GIBSON: I knew David Niles, but my contacts with him were principally through Philleo Nash, whom I had known, by that time, several years--almost from the first period that I was in Washington.

Philleo and I were socially friendly. He lived just a few doors from me in Washington. His wife Edith was very gregarious. My wife was suffering with being a new mother and a long way from home. And that friendship developed with Philleo and to his organization of the Georgetown Day School. The kids had gotten along very well; it was the first integrated school in the history [of Washington D.C.].

BRILEY: Did your daughter go to that school?

[16]

GIBSON: Yes, yes very much so. And that was the basis really--Philleo Nash and Philleo's wife, and my wife would meet in the park with the kids. And, I think Philleo really had the idea for the day school.

He met Aggie, and another one of the Quakers and they just kind of got together.

Philleo was an anthropologist. And he had a personality that fit him in any situation. He knew most of the guys like [A.] Philip Randolph--the Urban League people. He was a very social individual, but with basic beliefs that he never forgot.

So I talked to Philleo a great deal about Army discrimination. And I know he talked with David Niles. But I don't think it got any further than that because the President Roosevelt was not really moved.

Roosevelt's favorite story was about the Negro busman who served him when he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. What a good boy he was and how the coffee was always hot, and he told Walter White that story several times. So he, he was really remote, a racist considering.

BRILEY: The school that Nash ran, was it a small school?

GIBSON: Small yes, and it is still in existence. One of the best schools, one of the most difficult schools to get into in the district.

BRILEY I often wondered if it was still in existence.

GIBSON: I talked with the chap who is brother-in-law to Vernon Jordan. And he said getting in that school required contacts and pressures. But it still is very small and when it started it couldn't have been more than a dozen kids. But it gradually grew. And then they had a summer camp, and it was a great social mix--the parents mixed. Specific episodes, I cannot remember. But we were personally interested in the kids, and personally interested in getting an integrated school in the district.

BRILEY: So did some of the parents teach the classes, or did they hire outside teachers?

GIBSON: They hired teachers. Edith, Philleo's wife, I think, did some of the classes. But they hired teachers from the outside.

BRILEY: Did your friendship with Nash continue through the Truman administration and afterwards?

We'll move a little bit forward because we have in our file, a letter that you wrote. The letter was in defense of Nash when he was under attack by Joe McCarthy. Do you remember that?

GIBSON: Yeah, I remember that. Oh yeah.
[17]

BRILEY: Do you want to talk about that?

GIBSON: I remember the attack, and I remember my indignation. That the council--the senator--would attack Philleo. Because Philleo, certainly, was never a communist. But Philleo was inclusive with his friendships, and he was friendly with communists, as was I. I was very indignant. I was only indignant a couple of times, and one was with General [Colin] Powell and one with Senator McCarthy. Not that the individuals were--but with Philleo, it was an individual matter.

BRILEY: There was a letter that I saw that you had written to President Truman. And this goes back to the Universal Military Training. I was very intrigued by this letter. You talked about the International Boxing Club, and you mentioned that some of the fights had been carried on Voice of America. And how that was such a good idea to counter the Soviet propaganda that America discriminated against minorities. And I wanted to ask you to talk about that theory and that program.

GIBSON: Well, the note was justified because boxing was, and is international in scope. And never more evident than with the British Broadcasting Company, and in other countries with an interest.

That went back to the War Department days when I went to the man and wife who were the biggest soap opera writers in America. That through Yip [Edgar Y.] Harburg and his wife Edalaine, who we met in making the Negro soldier.

We believed that you change attitudes not head on, but through media that ordinary people would be exposed to. Yip was then engaged in the Lena Horne shows, the pictures that he produced.

Well, he introduced me to the soap opera age, to just include Blacks in the series in ordinary situations. So that propelled me to, and they did, and I don't know what the results were, but it happened through professional boxing, and I don't think boxing was too much of a loose cannon.

But I know what they did with Joe Louis in the Army. The only reason for his camp appearances was to show white soldiers a side of blacks that they did not know or appreciate. Joe at every camp, at his own expense, bought a steak dinner for every soldier. This, of course, caused him problems later on with the IRS. But that was the reason for his appearances. I don't know what else they did. I don't know what happened any other time, but that was the reason.

BRILEY: That makes sense to me

GIBSON: The International Boxing Club, incidentally, was founded at about the time of the Universal Military Training Commission meetings. At that time, Joe had decided to retire.

[18]

He was being pushed by the Hearst Organization to enter into an arrangement which didn't work out, but we finally got to Arthur Werts and Jim Norris whom I had never known before. We signed all of the principal heavy weights to his corporation through the International Boxing Club.

So in writing we had the Wednesday night fights, and the Friday night fights. We had a substantial background of handling television and radio. And that was the reason for my writing the note. It just wasn't an idle thought, it was something that was going on, and I thought it might have been helpful. I don't know what happened.

BRILEY: I thought it was interesting too, and it made sense that because you knew that it could be used to fight Russian propaganda.

GIBSON: Never heard anything from it. Which is not strange. [Laughter].

BRILEY: Yeah, the President was probably pretty busy. [Laughter] Well, we have so many things to talk about--the religion and welfare....

GIBSON: That was an off-shoot of Universal Military Training. Dan Poling organized that for several years. I don't know what happened as a result of it, but the President was very interested in religion.

He felt the receptive to Dan Poling and Father Walsh. Poling, more than Father Walsh, because he was outgoing and active. He came to Chicago several times to see me, which was strange, but he was very interested in expanding the role of religion.

BRILEY: So there were two committees that were very similar that you were on, is that right?

GIBSON: Well, we had the one, and then the other. The Morals and Religion of the Armed Services, that came after the Universal Military Training Commission. That was Dan Poling's idea.

BRILEY: Then there were two separate commissions?

GIBSON: Yes.

BRILEY: Do you remember any specific things about the meetings, or was Truman involved in any of those meetings?

GIBSON: Yes, yes. All of those. Yes, he was. I think we met a couple of times with him. I don't remember the specifics, but it was a Poling commission.

BRILEY: I know you are familiar with the Civil Rights Commission and the report, and some of the people that were connected with it, with the forty-sixth committee.
[19]

GIBSON: Was Bishop Gregg on that original committee? I was asked at the meeting last night about him. I know he was active with the investigation.

BRILEY: I have it right here. No I don't see his name unless this is ah...

GIBSON: I'm not, he was a source person for the ah...

Briley: He might have been. Channing H. Tobias, and Dr. Frank P. Graham, Dorothy M.E. Tilly, Bruce Shisken, Henry Knox Sherrill, Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., Charles Luckman, Sadie T. Alexander, James B. Carrey, James Dickey, Morris L. Ernst, Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsong. So those are at least the initial members of the Civil Rights Committee. Did you provide any input or do you remember any stories that you want to tell about these people?

GIBSON: Yeah, well Channing Tobias I've known intimately, a very good guy. Franklin Roosevelt--I had some pictures taken with him in Chicago during the campaign. I knew him, but the secretary of the commission was a woman, who was with McCormick, Cyrus McCormick. And I gave her all of my files from the War Department, which I never got back. But I cannot think of her name. Maybe she was on the second commission that John Sengstacke was on.

BRILEY: Let me look for those names. Charles Fahey, Charles Luckman, Lester B. Granger, Johnny [John H.] Sengstacke, William E. Stevenson, Dwight R.G. Palmer, and Alfonsus J. Donahue.

GIBSON: Yeah, that's the commission I gave my files to. The first commission didn't do too much. Which necessitated the second commission.

BRILEY: Both of these commissions had the larger aspect of fact-finding, or at least the Civil Rights Commission. People would write letters with information, and there were hearings. There was a lot of hate mail, as you can imagine. A lot of people were opposed to the commissions,

GIBSON: Lester Granger, who was the key person on the second commission, was very close to [James V.] Forrestal. He had done a lot of work--really he was the equivalent of our office but

with the Navy. He had investigated several incidents in the Navy. And there was an incident where the whole crew of black guys were court martialed for refusing to go aboard a ship where there had been an explosion [Port Chicago]. But that was a real working committee and a good committee. The first committee almost fell through as far as consequences were concerned. But the second one is the one that got all my stuff from the War Department.

BRILEY : The Fahy Committee. We have the papers here of the commission, both commissions. I hope some time you can come back, if you are interested in looking at the collections.

[20]

GIBSON: I am interested. I'd like to see the latter. They used a lot of my material and she never returned it. She was in personnel for the McCormack company. And the McCormack company had their problems, and she disappeared and then I never got my stuff back.

BRILEY : I'm sure, I know they had a lot of administrative people. Robert Carr, as you know, was very active on that. Do you want to say anything about, or make any comments about Sadie Alexander, or Henry Knox Sherrill, or Charles Fahey, or Gillem or any personalities that stand out or...

GIBSON: Was Gillem on that commission?

BRILEY: No, no.

GIBSON: Well Sadie Alexander was the wife of Raymond Pace Alexander who was one of the leading lawyers in the eastern area. She was the first black woman to do something in the law. She was active and active in the feminine organizations and an eloquent orator and a good, good lawyer. I knew her husband much better than I knew Sadie. Who were some of the others?

BRILEY: Boris Schisken.

GIBSON: I knew him by reputation.

Briley: And Sengstacke....

GIBSON: There's John Sengstacke. I had known intimately and well over the years.

BRILEY: John was on the Fahey committee. Do you want to say something about John?

GIBSON: Yes, he had power because of his newspaper. And was very close to Dawson.

BRILEY : And the newspaper was the Chicago Defender?

GIBSON: The Chicago Defender was one of the strongest of the black newspapers because in the early days in the South, Pullman porters would carry the Defender into Southern areas. So it was always an event when the train came in, and we got the weekly Defender. John had a wife who was much stronger than he. But he was a good man. He was on one of the Roosevelt committees dealing with the Virgin Islands. But his power was in his newspaper. Very good man.

BRILEY: Okay, some other names on the list. And this is going back off topic just to catch some names. I don't think we talked about James V. Forrestal. Did you ever meet him or have any thoughts about him?

[21]

GIBSON: Yes, yes. He was very strong on matters of this nature. He had Henry Ford assigned to personnel in the Navy and met with him, with Henry Ford. Forrestal however was very close to Mr. Grainger. They went to college together somewhere. He had very strong feelings about race. But he got so mixed up that his problems resulted in his suicide, in fact. But, really, if he had lived there would have been some very, some strong measures taken on the Navy's side.

BRILEY: Do you need some water?

GIBSON: Yeah, I've had this nagging cough and cold. Forrestal was a very impressive person. He had a broken nose from prize fighting. So he was very aggressive, very able. Lester Granger did a lot of work for Forrestal—investigations--and met Henry Ford also.

BRILEY: Do you need to take a break? You mentioned Henry Ford. Did you have something to say about him?

GIBSON: Yeah, we got to know him. Joe Louis had been working on the Ford-Lincoln assembly line before he went to the Army. Because I had known Ford when he was released from the Navy and assumed the control of the Ford Motor Car Company.

He went out to see him. Joe had wanted to get a Lincoln Distributorship. And we talked to Ford for a couple of hours, and didn't get the distributorship. But Joe was driving and he came up to where Ford had walked us to the exit, and Joe had a gearshift lever in his hand and said, "Let's go old buddy, I told you these Lincoln's weren't worth anything."

So Joe got a new Lincoln on the spot. But other than that, Ford wasn't around much longer in the Navy.

BRILEY: He got a free Lincoln?

GIBSON: Oh yeah, every year, and he said that "I told you that they weren't worth anything." And that's off the topic too.

BRILEY : No problem, that's a great story. We need to go back to the desegregation of the military. And if you could talk a little bit about a report of the task force that you and McCloy authored. It stated that African-Americans have a constitutional right to serve in combat roles. And the Army has an obligation to make the most and best effective use of its soldiers.

GIBSON: That's the language that is in the citation, not my language. Early on, I knew that you could not reach the Army on the right, or the wrong, or any other than to say that they were not using effectively the military asset. So that was, what struck McCoy, and I could reach him on that basis.

BRILEY: A good business reason.

[22]

GIBSON: Yes. It's all in the way you present it. But that was ultimately the Gillham Board. And all of the Gillham Reports and other reports skirted the basic issue of segregation, and really were a waste of time in the sense that all they did was to admit the problem. And they never faced up to a solution.

So we had the task force, and all this. I gave [John J.] McCloy and Judge [Robert P.] Patterson a report; then I went by next plane to Europe. But I think really to the extent that Patterson could do anything—he did what he could do.

The 92nd stayed in line. Eisenhower fired General Lee. And I think that had consequences with Judge Patterson. He saw that you can't block a Supreme Commander on a race issue because it would be like carping, and Eisenhower was very popular.

But everything had its effect. All of the reports led up to President Truman. And he was the only one that would do anything, and he did.

BRILEY: I know you talked about the 92nd Infantry Division last night, do you want to add anything to what you said?

GIBSON: There isn't much. Whatever we had, it would be detailed last night. But everything happened, and this illustrated the fact that you can't have segregated units in a good army.

But General Eisenhower in his remark to the Senate in forty-seven [1947] showed that he hadn't changed his basic attitude.

He, even after the UMT Report, hadn't changed his attitude. And it took two presidential commissions to really make the Army realize that the President meant what he said. But the Fahy commission really conveyed to them and really helped change them, for the Army realized finally that the President meant what he said. And that resentment is reflected by General Powell's remarks.

Because the Army really basically felt that integration interfered with military efficiency.

They believed it. There is no need for integration. It would be too hard. And, really, in a popular sense you could not fault them too much because they were efficient officers. They conducted a great army, but it could have been a greater army.

They couldn't see it because of their training. In their backgrounds, they had all developed a strong sense of the inferiority of Negroes. Which is basically set up in the records of the integration of the Armed Services set up. Well that's the Army's statement, not mine.

BRILEY: When you took that fact-finding trip, as you recall, to Europe. Was that the first time you had been in Europe?

[23]

GIBSON: Yeah. That was not really a fact-finding trip. I really went to Europe because--Otto Nelson, who I met the first day in the Munitions Building, realized the inefficiency of the 92nd. He knew that the Army was wrong. That's the reason I went.

In fact, you couldn't go out to any of these areas without an invitation. And [John J.] McCloy was very good about that. In fact, I have copies of the letters from Europe and the Mediterranean saying we would be happy, very happy to receive Mr. Gibson, and I knew they weren't, but they were writing McCloy.

As a matter of fact, one letter to McCloy, and I think this was from General Lee, addressed him as Judge McCloy. And he had a circle on it, and he sent it to me, and he said the people really don't know who I am, do they? [Laughter].

But Otto Nelson knew, and I knew the consequences. In the Air Corps and later in the Air Force, it was never destined for these units to succeed. In Italy, with the 99th, a very famous guy, Flip Cochran, went with the 92nd to give them training, the Army never intended for these units to succeed.

BRILEY: There's a couple of other individuals I wanted to ask about. I know we need to wrap up shortly. But A. Philip Randolph and Walter White.

GIBSON: I knew them both extremely well. Philip Randolph was an able organizer. He had threatened to march on Washington which resulted in the President's appointing Hastie and General Davis.

Walter White was ubiquitous. He was the whitest, black leader that ever existed. Definitely.

My father had known the family in Georgia--Walter's mom. In fact, he knew President Roosevelt and addressed him as Franklin, with his New York accent. As a matter of fact, I arranged for him to go to Italy.

The NAACP would be extremely critical. That's when he came before the Joint Committee, the Otto Nelson committee, by saying I want to thank the Army for the reception I received when my plane landed in Italy with fireworks. They said, "You silly son of a bitch, those were Germans shooting at you." So, he thought he had access to a lot of people a lot of years was really directed by Bill Hastie and he was effective because of his appearance and he did know a lot of people.

But the things that really, really basic things, were developed by Hastie. So he was for that reason effective.

Philip Randolph was an effective labor organizer. Had a following. He was respected and, really, feared which accounted for his success. But Lester Grainger picked up really, where A. Philip Randolph left off.

[24]

BRILEY: You mentioned Dr. Ralph Bunche. Did you have any personal stories about him?

GIBSON: Yeah, Ralph was at Howard with us--Bill Hastie and my friend Bill Nabret. We were social friends. At the time that Bill and I went to the War Department, Ralph applied for a commission in OSS and was turned down.

He was disabled. In his athletic days, he had banged his knees up. He was a great basketball player at UCLA. He was a wonderful teacher and a real intellectual. But we had a group--that political science guy, who went on to be the Governor in Trinidad. So we had an intellectual group, and we talked a lot about current things. And that was really the origin of the so-called black cabinet. Which was important only in our eyes. But Flip magazine did a piece that emphasized the futility of what we were doing. But I have a picture of Ralph, Frank Horne [Lena Horne's uncle] who was assistant to [inaudible, 683] and all the people who were active in that area.

BRILEY: How about Thurgood Marshall?

GIBSON: Thurgood had graduated from Howard when I met him. But he was a frequent visitor to Washington. Because....

BRILEY: We're talking about Thurgood Marshall.

GIBSON: Thurgood--I'm a little mixed up on time, but I know that we had a lot of meetings, and I think this time was a little mixed up. But Thurgood was really mentored by Jim Nabret, who was later President of Howard University, when he [Thurgood] was a law student, Bob May, my friend from law school days, and Bill Hastie.

We really discussed issues, legal issues with Thurgood, who had a facility for expression that was intellectual. More intellectual facility than the others except for the possible exception of Charlie Houston. But Thurgood was very able and a tremendous joke teller.

Arguably Charlie Houston was really the dean. Houston had been the general council for the NAACP, and Bill had been in his [Houston's] law firm after he graduated from Harvard.

Charlie Houston had been in McCloy's class I think, and was offered the position of Civilian Aide, after Bill had resigned. So that was the group around Thurgood.

Thurgood, of course, in the War Department days went to Lockburn Airbase at the time of the court-martial of an entire squadron for refusing to obey a military order to go to a Jim Crow officer's club--including Coleman Young, the future mayor of Detroit, and a few other people--and Thurgood represented them in the court-martial case.

Then he represented men court-martialed in Arizona. The men were convicted, sentenced to death. But later on, when reviewed, the whole case was dismissed.
[25]

Then Thurgood worked for the Navy at the time of the Naval General Corp. The men who refused to load ships when there had been an explosion. So Thurgood was very active in that whole Army period, and appeared in several, several trials for soldiers. Very, very able man, and it later developed that he looked up to Bill Hastie, to a lesser extent Bob May, and to an even greater extent Charlie Houston. But he aided a great deal in the war period.

BRILEY: Well, is there anything you would like to say in summation, or anything that we left out?

GIBSON: No, the only thing you can do with all of it, is to emphasize, and this is almost hackneyed, Truman's position, decision, and action. Everything else leading up to that makes you feel some Divine hand was guiding everything up to that point. It's a little corny, but I believe it, so.

That's about it.

BRILEY: Well thank you very much.