



## EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

### INTERVIEW WITH MELVIN MILLER

August 7, 2007  
South Boston, Massachusetts

**Interviewer**  
Beatriz Swerdlow

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TRANSCRIPT

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**Swerdlow:** This is an interview with Mr. Melvin Miller, editor and founder of the *Bay State Banner*. First, I want to thank you for giving me your time today. It would be great to learn about your background and where you come from, because I know you've been in Boston a long time. Were you born here?

**Miller:** Oh yes, I was born here. My parents were born here. Some grandparents were born here. My family has been in Boston since the 1880s.

**Swerdlow:** That's a long time. Were you educated in Boston as well?

**Miller:** Yes, I went to Boston Latin School and Harvard College, and then I went to Columbia Law School. I'm a lawyer by profession.

**Swerdlow:** Of course Boston Latin School has a reputation as one of those good schools.

**Miller:** It's a very severe school.

**Swerdlow:** What was your educational experience like?

**Miller:** There was always racial discrimination, but back then, the black community was very strong, so we never felt overwhelmed by it, even though we knew there wasn't much that we could do about it. Many people don't want to look at things historically or longitudinally, because now the minorities in Boston are the majority of the population. In 1940 there were only 24,000 blacks in Boston, and the Boston population was somewhere over six hundred some-odd thousand. Blacks only amounted to three percent of the total population. That is not a sound base for establishing any kind of political authority, and we understood that. So we had to fight these things as best we could.

I remember that I always had conflicts in the public schools about racially derogatory remarks or books. I can remember when I was a child, and I think it was only about the second grade, we were supposed to read *Little Black Sambo* at school, if you can imagine that, and I refused to read it.

**Swerdlow:** How old were you at that time?

**Miller:** Maybe seven. When I think back on that, I say, “How did I know not to submit to that?” The teachers thought it was a good thing to bring up my parents. My parents were horrified, and we got the book thrown out of the school system. I’ve had problems like that all the way through.

I had a severe conflict with a teacher in the sixth grade. I went to the Henry Lee Higginson School. The teacher was putting on a program. There was a little auditorium in the David A. Ellis Elementary School—so everybody was preparing songs. She was preparing some slave songs. I told her, “I don’t sing slave songs.” She got irate and I said, “If you could kindly excuse me from that, then we’ll all be on the same page. If you want to sing them, that’s fine, but I won’t sing them.” So she said, “No, you’re going up there, and you’re going to sing.” I said, “No, I think the problem is more severe than you think. Not only will I not sing them, but when we come to the slave songs, I’ll leave the stage because I don’t want anybody even to think I’m singing them.”

**Swerdlow:** Where did that come from? Was that because of your parents and what they were teaching you?

**Miller:** The middle-class black community was a very proud, very strong community. We did a story about the neighborhood in which I grew up, and I’ll give you a copy of that before you leave.

**Swerdlow:** That will be wonderful. Thank you.

**Miller:** That will give you some idea of what I came from, what I was a part of. We understood that there would be discrimination, but we never for once thought it had anything to do with our inferiority. We thought it was a problem of the person who was attempting to inflict the disrespect.

**Swerdlow:** From an early age, you obviously knew that, as you said, there was discrimination and that things were very different for black kids than they were for white kids.

**Miller:** Absolutely, but the interesting thing is, we also never went from there to a general hostility toward whites, because Roxbury, where I grew up, was racially mixed. People just all lived together. I had Jewish friends, Irish friends, Italian friends, and that was just part of the neighborhood. I knew where their hearts were, so it was not possible for people in my group to have a generally hostile attitude against all whites.

**Swerdlow:** At that time, were you getting together with the people that you described?

**Miller:** Yes. We’d go to each other’s houses, sure. We lived in the same neighborhood. It wasn’t like it is now. I know, with my daughter, you make play dates. What is that? That is so funny, this suburban approach to creating the environment for their children. When I was a child, you’d just hang out with the people in the neighborhood. Some were white; some were black.

**Swerdlow:** It seems like there was a strong sense of community in those days.

**Miller:** Very strong.

**Swerdlow:** It's amazing that there was, in some ways, natural integration at that time, because you lived around people from different ethnicities, and it sounds like you interacted and you got along fine.

**Miller:** Yes, we did. There were other groups who had more hostility to Jews and stuff. I used to hear about it. But we protected those who were our friends, just like you'd stand up for any friends.

**Swerdlow:** You went on and of course graduated from high school. Then you went on to Harvard and Columbia Law?

**Miller:** Right.

**Swerdlow:** Was it difficult to gain entrance, or was that process fairly smooth for you?

**Miller:** To tell you the truth, how do you know? I had no access to sitting around with the people who were making the decisions of who got in and who didn't. I was not what you'd call a wonderful scholar. My grades in high school weren't extraordinary, but I was a very good test taker. The reason for that was that I made myself a good test taker, because I knew that, given my disposition, organizing my energies around consistently doing well in these courses, with hostile teachers and an unfriendly classroom, was not something I could do. I said, "If I'm going to move forward, I have to kill the test." So I got past exams and analyzed them and asked, "Okay, how do these things run?" I made myself a good test taker.

**Swerdlow:** Did you have mentors at Boston Latin School?

**Miller:** Yes. Not inside the school, but in the community there were always mentors. It's interesting that you mention that, because I'm going to write an editorial next week on something that is missing from the black community now. Everybody talks about children not being in two-parent homes, but there's something else that's gone from the community, and that's the elders. We had elders who were highly respected and regarded. When people had problems, you'd go visit them, and they would help you through it.

I can remember, once, there was a guy who called himself a thug, who has since been annihilated in that way of the world, who threatened one of our elders. I called him in and I said, "No, we don't do that. You have to go and apologize, and if you don't, then there are a whole bunch of people you're going to have to deal with." Here is a guy who was a tough one, who wouldn't apologize.

**Swerdlow:** It sounds like, at that time, there was a reverence for the older folks that could pass down.

**Miller:** Yes. It was not just getting old; you had to be old and wise. You know what I mean?

**Swerdlow:** Yes.

**Miller:** There were some old drunks or people who were ne'er-do-wells. We knew that they were ne'er-do-wells. At the same time, there were people who were older who carried

themselves in a certain way, who had a certain aura about them that people would respect, and they visited them. One of the things you'll find in the story that I'll give you is that this is a community full of extraordinarily accomplished people. They weren't when I was young, but they went on to do big things. Yet one of the most highly respected persons in the community was a maid. So you see, it didn't have anything to do with what degrees you had or how much money you had. There was a certain status that could be attained regardless of any of these things.

**Swerdlow:** That's wonderful. I look forward to reading that. So you graduated from Harvard and went on to Columbia Law.

**Miller:** Right. I'm class of '56. As a matter of fact, Senator Kennedy was there when I was.

**Swerdlow:** At Harvard?

**Miller:** We were there at the same time.

**Swerdlow:** That's interesting. Did your paths cross?

**Miller:** They didn't cross, but I knew him. He wasn't a Senator, obviously, but I knew him because, to tell you the truth, I wanted to play football. In those days, Harvard didn't give any help to football players, and I had to work. I was interested in making money. But I was interested in the football team. He played end, and I knew a number of guys who were on the football team.

**Swerdlow:** What was your perception of him at that time and of his family?

**Miller:** I didn't have any special perception.

**Swerdlow:** But of course you were familiar with the Kennedys.

**Miller:** Somewhat. But to tell you the truth, given the student body at Harvard, the Kennedys, at that time, were not necessarily exceptional. I spent more time with a classmate who's dead, Sadruddin Aga Khan, Sadri Khan. I did know Ali Khan's brother, the uncle of—now the head of the Ismailis, and I can remember when he came in as a student. I met him. So there were people who had very exceptional backgrounds at Harvard. With Kennedy, I think people understood that his father had done some exceptional work for the government, but he was in a rarified atmosphere, full of people of equivalent accomplishment.

**Swerdlow:** Absolutely. So it was right after Columbia Law that you started the paper, the *Bay State Banner*?

**Miller:** Yes, I guess it was. As you can tell, I'm a committed Bostonian. When I came back, they had the largest residential urban renewal program in the country going on in my neighborhood, and it was disconcerting to see the big ball knocking down rows of buildings and everything, completely changing the look of the area. At the time, we had a history of a newspaper starting, and then when the founder would die, it would collapse. So there wasn't an active newspaper at that time. I tried to get somebody to step in. When nobody did, I said, "I'll go and see what I can

do.” I fully expected to have a career as a very successful and wealthy lawyer, and that’s not quite how it turned out.

**Swerdlow:** Well, this is obviously your passion.

**Miller:** No, not really. People think that. They say, “You must love it,” and I say, “Well, no.” I’m going to tell you quite frankly, I think that without the *Banner*, the city of Boston would have been in very severe racial difficulty. The way I answer it is a little irreligious, and I say, “I have no more passion about that than Jesus had of going up on the cross,” if you understand what I’m saying. You do what you have to do, but it’s not necessarily something that you say, “Oh, this is just wonderful.” I’m not sure that Mother Teresa thought it was just absolutely wonderful to walk around the back streets in New Delhi, picking up dying, impoverished people. You do it. How do you say that’s a passion?

**Swerdlow:** Then you obviously saw a need.

**Miller:** That’s precisely what I did. I felt that I had to do this. It’s been a disappointment to me that the business community didn’t fully understand it the way I did, but if you look at the pressure that we’ve had in the city and the lack of racial strife, somebody ought to wonder why we didn’t have the kind of racial strife that inflicted other cities. Even what they tried to describe as a race riot in 1967 wasn’t a race riot at all. That was totally mischaracterized as a race riot. We never had a race riot, and we’ve got photos to prove it.

**Swerdlow:** You started the paper around 1964?

**Miller:** Sixty-five.

**Swerdlow:** Sixty-five. You were definitely part of a lot of turmoil and riots and a really black period.

**Miller:** Around the country.

**Swerdlow:** Yes. By the time the busing crisis came up in the early ’70s, things had definitely gotten hairy.

**Miller:** Yes, but an interesting thing is, do you remember when the [Otto] Kerner Commission was appointed? If you read the Kerner Commission’s recommendations for the media, there’s only one city in the country that complied with those recommendations: the city of Boston. I was chairman of an organization that brought all of the media together to try to see whether we could alter our policies to be of greater benefit to the involvement of the so-called racial minority communities in the affairs of the city. We were the only city that complied.

**Swerdlow:** How did you feel personally when the order came down that there was to be busing in Boston?

**Miller:** I knew it was going to happen anyway. Many people do not understand why it happened, and that has contributed to a bunch of fiction about it. Arthur Garrity fully understood that this was the most draconian solution he could find, and he didn’t want to do that. He had other

proposals. When he confronted members of the Boston School Committee with milder solutions that could achieve the same thing, they essentially thumbed their nose at him. They left him with no alternative but to find a solution that the courts could monitor and control without reliance on the support of the school committee. That's what happened.

**Swerdlow:** Please mention—and we talked about it before we turned on the tape—that you knew Judge Garrity for many years, and he was your friend.

**Miller:** Yes, he was.

**Swerdlow:** You almost surely had a chance to talk to him about this.

**Miller:** This was a very troubling case for him, obviously, and it was troubling for a number of reasons. He was harassed. Being an Irish Catholic, an old Holy Cross guy, he was subjected to a lot of, I won't say intimidation, because once you get to that level, you get into serious trouble with the feds. But fortunately he lived in Wellesley, so he didn't have to be right in the middle of the city, having to put up with so much nonsense. He was characterized as a traitor and a sellout and all sorts of things. To tell you the truth, knowing him, that would roll off of him like water off a duck's back. At the same time, he thought that there were probably other solutions that would have been easier and better than massive busing.

**Swerdlow:** Did your paper cover the events of the time?

**Miller:** Yes, we covered it. When you say the events of the time, this was a long period. First of all, when Ruth Batson was the head of the education committee, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] presented a series of complaints to the school committee, hoping that these problems could be resolved. The school committee, of course, refused to even acknowledge that de facto segregation existed.

**Swerdlow:** Right.

**Miller:** De facto segregation, as you probably know, just means that for any natural reason, such as the racial homogeneity of a community, the schools are all black, and there's no illegality in that.

**Swerdlow:** No. It's where people live.

**Miller:** It's where people live. They refused to acknowledge that, and they took a hostile attitude. They essentially forced the black community to take other actions. The interesting thing is that the goal of the black community at that time was not racial integration of the schools. We wanted to depoliticize the way education resources were distributed. So if a school was all black, you knew you'd get inexperienced teachers, books that were falling apart, no supplies. You had these problems that developed.

In one area, the school was overcrowded, and the school system wouldn't assign the overflow to another school, so we had children in the boiler room, with desks and with rodent droppings all around. These were the kinds of conditions that people were trying to change. I don't think

people, at least of my generation, think that sitting next to a white kid is going to somehow make you smarter.

**Swerdlow:** Right. There was a group trying to gain control of the resources so that the black schools could be controlled by black leaders so that they could hire better teachers, et cetera.

**Miller:** People even set up separate schools. Bea Miller, who is in Chicago now, was the headmistress of—I forget what they call the school—the Freedom School. That was set up because the schools were boycotted. See, people don’t look, and they get a complete miscomprehension of what’s going on. The real general, the strategist for the whole thing, was Jim Breeden. Do you know the name Jim Breeden?

**Swerdlow:** Yes, I do.

**Miller:** Jim Breeden was the one who was planning the stay-out-of-schools. He was sending the troops here and there just like a general. I used to tease him. He’s a friend of mine.

The other thing that people forget about is Operation Exodus. I know you have some information on that. The idea was that Boston had an open enrollment system, and that meant, if you lived in the neighborhood, you would go to the neighborhood school. But if there were open seats there, then anybody else from anywhere else in the city could have them.

**Swerdlow:** Right. But it was difficult for black children to move to different schools.

**Miller:** That’s why we had Operation Exodus. We set up a transportation system so they could go. We weren’t trying to integrate the other schools. It’s just that the physical conditions of the schools in the neighborhood were not satisfactory. You might have a school, let’s say, that had 12 rooms, and four of them were uninhabitable. You know what I mean? They would force the kids to go in there, but parents would say, “This is not adequate. Let’s go somewhere else.” That’s what that was about.

To tell you the truth, in those days I never heard anybody focus primarily on racial mix. The strategist, Jim Breeden, has often said, “If you had white kids in the school. In order to get us, you have to get your own.” Do you know what I mean? Because if white kids were being subjected to the same teachers and educational budget, then maybe there would be some protest over it. That was what we were trying to do. It was not racist in the conventional sense. Boston was very different.

I remember when the busing happened, I started getting calls, “Why isn’t there a riot?” I said, “Well—” I used to get a lot of calls from people from the South, who saw race differently, and I said, “This is not race as you understand it. The shortcoming of blacks in Boston is that they’re not Irish Catholics.” *[laughter]* That’s a little different, you see, because what we’re doing, from their perspective, is encroaching on a little peninsula of the city of Boston that they believe they own and control. They say what goes on there.

**Swerdlow:** Yes.



**Miller:** The way to prove that point is that the kids who were bused out of South Boston went to other schools with blacks, and I checked on it at the time. Wonderful, they're getting along famously.

One of the things that the *Globe* kept saying that used to make me so irate, particularly after there were stories about the buses of kids coming into South Boston and the adults would throw stones—I can remember once, I was listening to it on the radio, and I heard glass breaking and little kids screaming. Little white kids and blacks were listening to it. Little white kids would walk right by. It was totally unacceptable among black adults to harm any kid, no matter what race. Not one white kid was harmed by an adult, not one. They kept saying, “There’s violence on both sides.” How the heck do you say that? There’s not violence.

I can remember once, the school committee tried to set us up. We had the first new school in decades being built in the black community, the William Monroe Trotter of Humboldt Avenue. They said, “This is supposed to be your school, and they’re going to make it the school for kids from West Roxbury,” and blah blah blah. It was supposed to be a special school to attract students. Some of the militants showed up for the first day of school. I went out there that day, and I saw all these middle-class blacks, and I said, “What are you doing out here?” They answered, “This is historic. We have a new school here.” I said, “Bull, why are you here?” They said, “We hear that these militants are coming, and we don’t harm children. That doesn’t happen on our turf.” The militants showed up, and some guys approached them and said, “Looking for some action? You got it right here!” They backed off. The white kids came in, had a good time.

It was around that time that I could hear—I’m not sure that it was precisely that time, but I could hear the radio: black students were being assaulted in South Boston, and white kids were running around to the store to get soda in Roxbury, and nobody was even thinking of bothering them. It wasn’t even in our mind.

**Swerdlow:** I think you mentioned that the black community wasn’t looking to integrate the schools. The black community was perhaps trying to better their schools.

**Miller:** That’s precisely it, yes. The fact of the matter is it was quite clear that the people who controlled the assets down at the school committee were not seeing to it that the resources were equally distributed.

**Swerdlow:** Right.

**Miller:** There was one school that was in such bad condition that people said, “There’s one way to put this out of use,” and they had a mysterious fire that rendered the school totally inoperable.

**Swerdlow:** Did you ever run into some of the Restore Our Alienated Rights, the ROAR people, or the more extreme group that derived from that?

**Miller:** Yes.

**Swerdlow:** Did you ever run into Louise Day Hicks?

**Miller:** Yes. I ran against her for Congress in 1972. It was not my intention to run against Louise Day Hicks, but Hubie Jones, for some reason, got the big political idea that he had to do this. I'm trying to think of the man we wanted—Joe [Moakley], oh, my God, he just died. He won and was there for 27 years. Anyway, he was a moderate, and I thought that he would be a wonderful guy to replace Hicks. I knew I had not the chance of a snowball in hell, but the problem is that the way Hubie was running his campaign, he was polarizing the positions. The way he was running his campaign, he made it easier for Louise Day Hicks to mobilize the crazies behind her. I said, "This has to be diffused." So I came in with the voice of reason. It was so funny. I remember that I would go to campaign events, and people would say, "Gee, he made a lot of sense. Too bad he's not Irish," [*laughter*] or stuff like that.

By the way, we're accustomed to that. Boston's a very ethnic city. As a matter of fact, I was just talking to a black guy from New Orleans. He says, "It's funny. In New Orleans it's blacks and whites. Up here, you say somebody's white and then somebody will say, 'Yes, and?'" Because if you don't identify them ethnically, you haven't said a whole lot. At the same time this busing conflict was going on, there was a lot of conflict between the Italians and the Irish, as you probably know, and obviously there has always been a lot of hostility toward Jews. It's mellowing out now, so I'm glad about that.

**Swordlow:** What did you think of ROAR and the Powder Keg group? They were very well organized, and I suppose you could say militant, and very successful in many ways.

**Miller:** Why do you think they were successful?

**Swordlow:** Well, in disrupting.

**Miller:** Was it Pixie Palladino?

**Swordlow:** Yes, and Alice McGoff and Rita Graul and that group. They certainly, even after the order, when the schools were integrated, when kids were bused, the kids themselves were impeding the daily goings-on of a normal school day.

**Miller:** To tell you the truth, the action was taken, and this was part of the cleanup. They couldn't be much more than a nuisance.

**Swordlow:** They were definitely a nuisance, if not more than that.

**Miller:** Right.

**Swordlow:** There was some violence. There were some physical altercations and a lot of racial epithets.

**Miller:** To get back to Senator Kennedy's position on this, people looking at Senator Kennedy today would probably not think much of what his position was 30 years ago, but the Senator Kennedy of 30 years ago is not who he is today. Since that time, he has won reelection time and again. He has enormous status in the Senate, and he has such prestige that he's become an elder statesman. But back then, one of the things that I respected about him and have always respected is that he put it on the line, and these ROAR people went after him with viciousness. He even

had to get protection at times. The interesting thing is that he was the only white politician of any substance who did that at that time. There were other lesser politicians who came out. I was disappointed that Kevin White ran for cover on this issue.

**Swordlow:** You don't think he handled it particularly well?

**Miller:** No, I don't think so.

**Swordlow:** There was a councilman, Tom Atkins, who seemed to work behind the scenes to try to help Kevin White deal with this situation.

**Miller:** Yes, but Kevin White wasn't going to do anything that would create the appearance that he had taken a solid position on the substance of the issue. Gee, you've done a lot of good research. Tom's been ill for years. He lives in New Jersey now.

**Swordlow:** Really?

**Miller:** Yes.

**Swordlow:** There was one little side story that I was reading about that fascinated me, about a concert that was supposed to take place with James Brown. I'm sure you know about that.

**Miller:** Yes, right.

**Swordlow:** Tom Atkins was instrumental in trying to get James Brown to go ahead with that concert, because there was such fear of violence from the black kids. If James Brown didn't perform, they thought that there would be a riot. The way that was worked out, of course, was that James Brown ended up performing.

**Miller:** Joe Moakley, by the way, is the Congressman who won. He was so funny. Whenever I would run into him, I would say, "Joe, you've done a pretty good job with my seat." Joe and I were both moderates, but he had the chance of winning. There had to be a strong moderate voice so that the Louise Day Hicks people would lose their clout. I'm going to tell you a funny thing. People think that Louise Day Hicks is just an out-and-out racist, and she isn't. She's an opportunist.

**Swordlow:** I agree with that, yes.

**Miller:** There's a difference. There were meetings with her when she was turning over the idea of whether she was going to be the mother of school integration or the mother of the status quo, and she decided that the latter was a more beneficial position to take politically.

**Swordlow:** It's too bad that she didn't take a more honest stand, because it seems that she did have a background that wasn't racist. One of her good friends in college was a black woman.

**Miller:** A good friend of mine was in law school with her, and they were friendly. People do not distinguish between ethnically oriented policies and racism, and they're quite different. It's one thing to say, "You are of no value and stupid and just walking in the bottom end of negative

qualities because you're black," and it's another to say, "I'm the skins and you're the shirts, and because my tribe sticks together, we're going to take it all." Neither position is good, but they're quite different.

**Swerdlow:** Yes, it seems that she was misguided in some way, because she started out being reasonable. History is the judge, and I don't think that her role is something that she would be proud of.

**Miller:** No, I don't think so. She's gone now. The funniest thing is, when you look at the old pictures of the crowd standing there, preventing the buses from coming into South Boston, the next mayor, Raymond Flynn, was right in the front of the crowd. He didn't get religion until he saw that the winds of change were too powerful.

**Swerdlow:** There was so much ugliness, though, at that time. You saw the worst of people in many ways, because as you said, the Irish—people are culturally what they are, but some of the groups, like the ROAR group, who were made up of an Irish core group, were very ugly and very extreme in not only their views, but how they presented themselves in public. There were a lot of ugly words and a lot of horrible things that were being thrown around. It sounds like you understand that that was an extreme and that it didn't reflect all of the community.

**Miller:** If you're a Bostonian, you understand. When the Yankees ran everything, they didn't think fondly of the Irish, and they tried to keep them out. The history of blacks in Boston is different. In the 1800s, blacks were in the state legislature and held public office, not just as an unusual circumstance; it was a regular thing. Then when the potato famine hit and the Irish came in great numbers, the Irish knew what they had to do, and they restructured the political districts. Around the first decade of the 20th century, blacks were absolutely removed from any possibility of attaining public office, either on the state level or in the cities, because their population was small. There you have it.

**Swerdlow:** These were Senator Kennedy's people. They supported him, and then they turned on him and hated him for his stance for busing.

**Miller:** Absolutely, they did. To tell you the truth, Ray Flynn was in the state legislature at the time, and boy, he was right out there on the front lines in opposition to the buses coming in. The unfortunate thing is, I think the major papers didn't properly blame the residents—You're in South Boston now. You know that, don't you?

**Swerdlow:** It's fascinating to me that I am in South Boston.

**Miller:** This is the old Army base. We used to be up the street, in the Fargo Building, the old naval headquarters. When blacks heard that we'd moved to South Boston, they said, "What? You moved to South Boston?" I said yes. "Where?" "The Fargo Building." They said, "Oh." The reason they said, "Oh," was that there was a field house where they used to hold a lot of high school track meets. Blacks used to come down here all the time to go to the track meets. The older generation understood that.

**Swerdlow:** With your paper at the time of this uproar, were you trying to bring the black community together with your paper and to give them information that would help them?

**Miller:** Oh, yes. Remember that there were many positive things going on. Remember that the METCO [Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity] Program was underway. The Racial Imbalance Act had passed. This is all before the school decision. We supported, of course, the reasonableness of the black approach to resolving these issues. We covered it; we were all over it. As a matter of fact, all of the old stuff is on the Internet. You can have access to that. Is that how you did your research?

**Swordlow:** We have a great deal of material because we are part of the University of Virginia, and so LexisNexis. There have been a lot of books written about this time as well.

**Miller:** You can get the old stories on LexisNexis. Somebody pointed out to me that I didn't understand. We were the first publication to call for black power, before Stokely Carmichael did. Remember Stokely Carmichael? Then, boy, the papers got it and blew it up. What we meant by black power was inclusion of the black perspective in public policy, which certainly is not a threatening idea. We were, at least for the people who were well read, forward thinking, but we're not southerners with a strong memory of stark oppression. There are southerners here, but our racial attitudes are a little different than you would find if you go down to Alabama or other places.

**Swordlow:** Looking back, did the black community see Senator Kennedy as their Senator?

**Miller:** Yes, I think so. Remember, we had Ed Brooke too.

**Swordlow:** Yes.

**Miller:** Ed Brooke was really our Senator, but that was not unusual. If you look at the history of Massachusetts, we used to have a Democratic and a Republican Senator for a long time. When Jack Kennedy was a Senator, [Leverett] Saltonstall was also a Senator.

**Swordlow:** We interviewed Senator Brooke last summer.

**Miller:** He and I are very good friends.

**Swordlow:** He's a wonderful man, and his wife is a lovely lady.

**Miller:** She is. I'll tell you a funny thing that a lot of people don't realize. Do you know she's black?

**Swordlow:** I know she's from the islands. She doesn't look black at all.

**Miller:** Yes, but you see, that's a funny thing. Ed Brooke doesn't even look black.

**Swordlow:** Right. What is black, you know?

**Miller:** That's a funny thing. One thing that white people don't understand about blacks, if you look at a black family, we run the racial gamut. My mother was much fairer than you, and not only is she black, on the DNA it looks like her mitochondria are from the Congo. She's so pale, she can't even get in the sun.

**Swerdlow:** My mitochondria are well mixed too.

**Miller:** If you go into most white families, there's certainly a monochromatic, and so seeing white people is not exciting or disturbing to most of us, whereas a lot of whites rarely see blacks in their neighborhoods.

**Swerdlow:** That brings me to where we are today. I hope that that's not the case anymore.

**Miller:** Absolutely. As you probably can tell from my writing, I get impatient with young people claiming, "Nothing has changed!" Nothing's changed from what? How can anybody who has lived through this begin to suggest there's nothing? I've been an activist since my early teens, and when I was about 18, I can remember going down to Washington with the NAACP. We were going down to meet with Senators and Congressmen to see if we could pass an anti-lynch law. Can you imagine that? An anti-lynch law. We thought that the only thing we could possibly do was, if we could have these murders that were racially based tried in the federal courts, maybe we'd have a better chance of putting some pressure on. An anti-lynch law when I was 18. See, you're too young to have lived in American apartheid. I'm going to tell you, I've been in South Africa, and so I can tell you that the apartheid I experienced in the U.S. was tougher than what I experienced in South Africa before [Frederik Willem] de Klerk stepped down.

**Swerdlow:** I'm not as young as you think. I actually came from South America in 1967, right before Martin Luther King's assassination, and I clearly remember the violence in the streets in Washington, D.C. It was quite a shock to me, because in South America, racial relations are very different from America.

**Miller:** Let me tell you the funniest thing. I remember going to a lecture by a lady from Cuba. We were listening to her stories, and in a casual remark she said, "I'm a white Cuban." She was as black as the ace of spades. I said, "What? How are you not a black Cuban?" She said, "My grandfather was white. If you have a white ancestor, you become a white Cuban." I said, "That's interesting, because it's just the opposite here. You could be as white as snow here, and if you have one drop of black blood somewhere in your line, then you're classified as black." It's interesting. All illusion, isn't it?

**Swerdlow:** It is.

**Miller:** Race is something I don't deal with. It's such a fantasy. I don't have that much to do with it.

**Swerdlow:** It would be nice if we could say that things were perfect today, but of course they're not.

**Miller:** It's never perfect anywhere, is it?

**Swerdlow:** It's not, but it's certainly better.

**Miller:** I remember in '57/'58, I was in London at the time of the Notting Hill riots, and some Teddy Boys decided they wanted to jump me just because I wasn't a white Englishman. I said okay. I was prepared. I said, "Which one of you wants to die first?"

**Swerdlow:** Oh, my.

**Miller:** When they saw that it wasn't going to be easy, they changed their mind.

**Swerdlow:** Had to have been scary, though.

**Miller:** I wasn't scared.

**Swerdlow:** No?

**Miller:** They would have lost.

**Swerdlow:** *[laughs]* That's good.

**Miller:** Three on one isn't bad.

**Swerdlow:** It's not?

**Miller:** No, because everybody thinks it means that if there are three people attacking you, you're fighting three people simultaneously. That's not how you do it. You keep moving, and you take the one over here, particularly if you have a weapon of some kind, and then you make it two on one. Believe me, after you drop the first one, the other two lose heart. I fought more than that in my day.

**Swerdlow:** That reminds me, I was reading last night, as a matter of fact, about Ted Landsmark.

**Miller:** Isn't that interesting, yes.

**Swerdlow:** He was a Yale lawyer who was attacked by Charlestown High School kids.

**Miller:** No, it wasn't. Ted Landsmark is the president of the Boston Architectural College. You know that, right?

**Swerdlow:** I know that that's what he does now. But I don't know if you remember that he was attacked.

**Miller:** You mean with the flag?

**Swerdlow:** Yes. There was a picture that won a Pulitzer Prize, yes.

**Miller:** That's right. Of course. We know that. The guy who did it, his family has faced one disaster after another, and Ted Landsmark has gone on to have a nice career. It's funny.

**Swerdlow:** He was an accomplished, educated man. The point was, if that could happen to him, then how did the average black man stand a chance in Boston?

**Miller:** That's a serious problem we have.

**Swerdlow:** Had or have?

**Miller:** No, we still have it. There are cultural differences. I come from an old culture, in a way, and we have a very formal way of addressing strangers. We used to think it was very strange that, particularly, the Irish are so casual, “Hey, buddy! Hey, Mack!” That would have been so disrespectful. We never would talk to one another like that. We used to say, “Ooh, that’s not very civilized, is it?” Different people have different customs—after a while, you get used to it. People used to address one another formally. That was part of the culture in which we grew up. Even people who knew each other for years and years would call each other Mr. and Mrs. Doña. You speak Spanish, right?

**Swordlow:** Yes, Doña.

**Miller:** Yes. You just wouldn’t call a strange person by their first name without an expression of respect, you know?

**Swordlow:** Right.

**Miller:** That was the culture in which we grew up. Like I said, I think of the terrible loss of the presence of elders in the community. When I started the *Banner*, I visited the elder who had been involved in publishing before me, and he was also a Harvard graduate, class of 1895, if you can believe that. He was the brother-in-law of William Monroe Trotter, and he was a dentist. He would get paid for being a dentist, and he would put the money in to keep the paper alive. He married Trotter’s sister. Trotter died in ’34, and his sister died, I think, in the ’50s, and so Charles Steward hung on. He used to laugh. He said, “I guess I’ve just been waiting for you.” We had a close relationship for the two remaining years of his life. I thought that it’s sad that a person who, whether he was right or wrong, successful or a failure, who had contributed and had worked his whole life for the upliftment of people was still relatively unknown.

I also believe that people who have done so much for us in the past deserve our respect. I know an old judge who had come under attack near the end of his career. I used to call him up once a month, and we’d have a chat. He died and they said, “Boy, he loved getting your calls.” As a matter of respect, I call Ed Brooke every now and then. People just don’t turn people loose. Do you know what I mean? Although I know that’s going to happen to me, but that’s okay. That’s the way, in my opinion, you’re supposed to do it.

**Swordlow:** Do you ever run into Senator Kennedy?

**Miller:** I run into Joe [Kennedy II] all the time, but I don’t run into the Senator. I remember well the last chummy conversations we had was the last time he had reelection. There was a black guy, a total fraud, running against him.

**Swordlow:** Who’s this?

**Miller:** The name will come to me. He’s a Republican. I guess Kennedy wanted to see what was going on. I can remember that we had a funny conversation, and I said, “Hey, forget about the press. I don’t think this guy will fork any lightning. Spend your time trying to get us a President.” He laughed and said okay. I admire Kennedy. I’m going to tell you, this country, without Kennedy there, would be in real serious difficulty, because he’s one of the few Senators



who has such a staunch support mechanism that he can take positions that a lot of people who are more perilously perched in the Senate would be unwilling to take.

**Swordlow:** He certainly has done a lot for a lot of important issues in this country.

**Miller:** Absolutely.

**Swordlow:** Civil rights, of course.

**Miller:** You ought to be proud of him down there at the University of Virginia. He went to Harvard College, the University of Virginia Law School, and he went to Milton Academy, I think.

**Swordlow:** How did the black community view Chappaquiddick?

**Miller:** Not much. That was a non-issue.

**Swordlow:** For the black community?

**Miller:** Yes.

**Swordlow:** That's interesting because, of course, maybe he could have run for President.

**Miller:** Things happen the way they're supposed to at that level. The Kennedys are such risk takers. That's what you have to look at. Joe's had troubles with cars and his children. They do things I'd never do. I'm scared, you know? I'm too timid to take those chances. I think Joe's a wonderful guy. He runs that program to provide fuel to the—

**Swordlow:** Exactly, yes. That's been going on for a long time.

**Miller:** When he makes those trips down to Venezuela, there's a guy with him who is like my son. He used to be my managing editor, and that's how he got into journalism. Then Joe stole him from me.

**Swordlow:** He did?

**Miller:** We share him sometimes.

**Swordlow:** It's really been a pleasure talking to you.

**Miller:** One important thing. I'm going to show you how tough it is. I opposed racial discrimination and gender discrimination, and some of the black militants threatened me because I wouldn't fire whites who worked for me. It was a time when we were going back on ourselves. So I resisted that. The funniest thing is—see, you think it's funny to be in South Boston—but my managing editor was Brian O'Connor, who lived in South Boston. He was the best managing editor I ever had, and he's the one who's with Joe now. A brilliant guy, also a Harvard alum. His father died in Vietnam. What a lot of people don't know about him, and he doesn't make much of it, is that he's part American Indian. He doesn't make a lot about that because he says, "I lived like an Irishman all my life, and so I'm not going to be pimping off being an Indian." But his

mother looks, to me, like an Indian. I had only one woman who was managing editor, and she became Assistant Press Secretary to President [Jimmy] Carter.

**Swerdlow:** Really? Wow.

**Miller:** My people, you'd be surprised. They're all over.

**Swerdlow:** I'm not surprised.

**Miller:** So watch what you say. You go after the *Banner*, they'll get you. [laughter]

**Swerdlow:** Your children will carry on the—

**Miller:** No. I have one child, and she's interested in theater. I'm now trying to figure out how to handle my transition.

**Swerdlow:** You're not thinking of retiring, are you?

**Miller:** I'll never retire. I'll die, though, soon. You don't live forever. I was in college with the Senator, he looks a lot older than I do, but we're not that much difference in age. If I live another 20 years—my father died at 92.

**Swerdlow:** And your mother?

**Miller:** My mother died when she didn't have to because she had something that was very curable. She was a very stubborn woman, and she said, "Oh no, I'm not—" The doctor wanted to hospitalize her, and she refused, and she went home and died, in her 70s. Her parents, both of them, died at 85, and her sisters lived between 85 and 90. The one surviving sister is 90 now, so there's a lot of—

**Swerdlow:** Good mitochondria.

**Miller:** Yes, right. That's really funny, because when I had my daughter, I decided to do my family tree, and it's been a fascinating experience. We've been, in a sense, multiracial for so many generations. I guess I suffer from the family curse in that I like women of whatever hue. [laughter] I was surprised to review the conduct of some of my ancestors. Gee, some of them were men of the cloth, too.

Anyway, so here we are. I have one daughter who is 17. I'm an old dad. She has one more year in high school, and she's absolutely committed to her theater. She doesn't want to be an actor, but she likes being a techie, and I think she'll probably eventually get interested in directing and producing.

**Swerdlow:** She's attended Boston schools?

**Miller:** She's at Brookline High School. She was in private schools all the way, and then I sent her to a highly respected private school called Noble and Greenough, out in Dedham. You wouldn't know about it. We have an extensive system of academically rigorous private schools,

like in the English tradition, like Eton and Harrow. But she is an urban person, and she wasn't terribly happy being in the company of so many people who were so sequestered. The girls were so spoiled and suburban, and she's an urban kid. One girl found it an overpowering challenge to ride the T downtown. She said, "Oh, let me out of here."

For some reason, she became absolutely enamored with Brookline High School. I was happy at that. It costs \$20,000 a year at the other school. I couldn't afford that, and I was figuring out how the hell I was going to do it, and then she said she wanted to go to Brookline High School. Fortunately, years ago I had registered her with METCO. Her mother said, "She's not going to be a METCO kid." You know what the METCO Program is, right? So I said, "Let me see if we can get her into Brookline High," and fortunately, through much travail, we accomplished it. She's doing very well there and has one more year.

**Swerdlow:** It's wonderful that she's attending a public school. That says a lot about the state that we're in with education, and that things are better, and that your daughter could attend—

**Miller:** Brookline High School is one of the best high schools in the country. I wouldn't be happy about her going into a second-rate high school. There would have to be one that was academically—I know this is challenging. The poor child stays up late at night doing her homework.

**Swerdlow:** Who gets to go to Brookline High School?

**Miller:** Residents of Brookline.

**Swerdlow:** You have to be a resident of Brookline?

**Miller:** Yes, unless you're in METCO.

**Swerdlow:** So it's a magnet school.

**Miller:** METCO faces a challenge now, because with this latest Supreme Court decision, there might be a question raised by some that you can't select students on a racial basis to go into this educational program if you get state support. On the other hand, the suburban schools would say, "We're interested in METCO because we're lily-white out here. We know it's not a lily-white world. We'd like our students to have at least some contact with kids of another complexion, and we're willing to pay for that. Since METCO can't afford to pay the total cost that we have to pay per student, the residents of Wellesley, Newton, we'd chip in the rest. We're not going to chip in the rest to bring some white-breads out here. We've already got those—in great abundance."

Let me give you the name of the people who handle stuff online.

**Swerdlow:** You had something that you mentioned at the beginning that you were going to give me, a background.

**Miller:** No, I'm going to give you the story. Don't worry about that. I'm so proud of that story because I'm proud of that neighborhood.

**Swerdlow:** We'll include that story with this transcript of your interview.

**Miller:** Really?

**Swerdlow:** Yes.

**Miller:** It's called ProQuest. I don't know whether you have that service.

**Swerdlow:** Yes.

**Miller:** You have ProQuest? Okay. They put every *Banner* online. Any time you want something, you can get it. I discovered a couple of typos in that thing, and it makes me so upset, but we're going to have to purify it.

**Swerdlow:** I'm going to go ahead and thank you for the interview and stop the taping and give you a chance to find the paper.

**Miller:** Here it is.

**Swerdlow:** Great. Thank you, Mr. Miller. We really appreciate your participating in Senator Kennedy's oral history.

**Miller:** What happened is, they have urban gangs. I still live on the same block I've lived on since I was three years old.

**Swerdlow:** Yes.

**Miller:** They formed a gang, these stupid little kids. I live on Harold Street. Parallel to that is Humboldt Avenue. Cutting across that is Harrishof Street, and then—oh, what's the other street? So they call themselves the H-Block. Totally nonproductive thugs who somehow moved into this area. I decided, "Let's do a story about the real H-Block, people who lived here 50 or 60 years ago." That story talks about the people who were there. It is based on my memories of my neighbors who were there, and I only put in the ones who had achieved extraordinary career results.

One of my neighbors, who is a friend of mine, is the first black guy to head a white University, Michigan State. He was the first black to be CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of a *Fortune 500* company. He's a brilliant guy, a friend of mine. His younger brother and I were best buddies, so when we were growing up, we always looked to him. "There goes Cliff [Clifton Wharton, Jr.], wow, talking to all those girls. Whoa." Those are the people I grew up with, and I think that the level of achievement is extraordinary, particularly since these guys achieved this when there was no affirmative action, nobody making the way. They plowed through the door.

**Swerdlow:** Yes.

**Miller:** You can see that what I told you about mitochondria makes sense, because if you don't have that kind of—

**Swerdlow:** Drive and—

**Miller:** Yes. What do they call it? What's the word in Spanish for male—

**Swerdlow:** Cojones?

**Miller:** *[laughs]* Cojones is one, yes. That's good, right. Cojones is good, but your machismo, I was thinking about. If you don't have that machismo, then you won't stand back. You had to be always moving forward, and that's what you get and that's the story.

**Swerdlow:** Thank you for your story.

**Miller:** I hope it's helpful.

**Swerdlow:** It's very helpful. You will receive the transcript in about two to three months, and if you want to add anything, please feel free to do so.

**Miller:** All right.

**Swerdlow:** Thank you for your contribution.

**Miller:** I hope it helps Kennedy's story get told properly.

**Swerdlow:** It's wonderful to hear the story of someone who has been a part of so much history in Boston. It's just amazing.