

Oral History of Charles T. Duncan
Second Interview
May 11, 2002

This is the second interview of the Oral History of Charles T. Duncan, as part of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Gregory L. Poe. The interview took place in Mr. Duncan's home at 1362 Myrtle Avenue, Annapolis, Maryland.

Mr. Poe: My name is Greg Poe. I am an Assistant Federal Public Defender in the District of Columbia, and I am here with Mr. Charles Duncan. Mr. Duncan, may I call you Charlie on the tape?

Mr. Duncan: Please do, yes.

Mr. Poe: Let me start with the very beginning, Mr. Duncan. Where were you born?

Mr. Duncan: Uh, in Washington, D.C. I like the sound of that – a native Washingtonian.

Mr. Poe: Describe a little bit about your very early childhood experiences if you would.

Mr. Duncan: I was born in 1924. Born at home, as a matter of fact, and that was not too unusual in those days. The address was 473 Florida Avenue, N.W., in Washington, which I mention only because it later became the site of our law offices, Reeves, Robinson & Duncan in 1953 and 1954. My mother was a public school teacher. My father was a physician. My father was a good deal older than my mother, twenty-one years, as a matter of fact. But it was a first marriage for both of them. The city, of course, in 1924 and until 1954 and thereafter, was strictly segregated, by race, and the

particular neighborhood in which I was born was then known, and is now known, as LeDroit Park, which is close to Howard University. And again, by further coincidence, it is in the same block, physically the same block, where Walter Washington now lives. He's 408 T Street, and I was 473 Florida Avenue. Because both my parents were professionals, I was born in a relatively well-to-do family.

Ms. Poe: Could you discuss a little bit your recollection of your parents and how they came to take the positions they did.

Mr. Duncan: In my father's case, and I should just clarify now in case anyone should be confused, my natural father was Dr. Charles Andrew Tignor, and my name was Charles Andrew Tignor, Jr. The Duncan part came in later when my natural father and my mother were divorced, and my natural father died shortly thereafter. My mother remarried Todd Duncan, who was a singer, who adopted me, and I changed my name to Charles Tignor Duncan, as I'm known today. I just throw that in because some people don't know that. Anyway, in my father's case, I've always – I don't know a lot about his ancestors and history, not nearly as much as I should – I've always been amazed that in 1924, he was a medical doctor. As best I can figure out, he was born in or about 1878, which was not too long after slavery. And it's always interested me that he was a physician, having been born when he was. Now whether – I really don't know much about his ancestry. I do know, I just recently came across, the names of his father and mother. His father, according to the record that I saw, came

from the island of Martinique. But that's absolutely and totally all that I know about his forebears. It was my understanding at an early age that my father's parents or relatives lived in the Anacostia part of the District of Columbia, but I don't really know that. I should point out that he died when I was eight years old, so I don't remember a whole lot about him, except I remember him fondly and favorably. My mother, who was 21 years his junior, is still living. She's 105 now. She and her family – she was from Charlottesville, Virginia – and she had two sisters and a brother. Both sisters came to this area. Her brother remained in Charlottesville. Her family name was Jackson. According to Jackson family lore, they were descended *a la* Sally Hemings from Thomas Jefferson. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. We have family historians who say that it is, and they can trace it back, but I never paid much attention to it, and it's my view that if so, so what? You know, so what? Who cares? Anyway, she came to Washington, D.C., as a relatively young girl, 16, 17, 18, to go to what was then called Miner Normal School. It was later called D.C. Teacher's College. And now I guess it is part of UDC. But she went to Miner Normal School. And when she was here, she lived with her sister, my aunt, at 402 U Street, N.W., in the old LeDroit Park neighborhood, one block up from Walter Washington, who was 408 T. And my cousin, Elizabeth, still lives in that house – 402 U Street. So, some things go way back.

Mr. Poe: On that issue, and by the way, I should note we're speaking here on May 11, 2002. But on that score, is 473 Florida still standing?

Mr. Duncan: It's still standing. It's, I believe, unoccupied, vacant, and has been for a number of years. That whole block of Florida Avenue, which used to have Harrison's Café in it, hasn't been yuppified yet. U Street is moving that way, but it hasn't quite reached over that far. Nor has Howard come that far south. It's still sort of a desolate neighborhood.

Mr. Poe: Well there's a lot of redevelopment in some surrounding areas, so it seems perhaps inevitable.

Mr. Duncan: Oh sure. Oh it'll happen sooner or later. Yeah.

Mr. Poe: Let me ask you, Charlie, about the Tignor family. Is there any continuing Tignor family line in the District?

Mr. Duncan: Oh sure. The one I know best is, I guess she would be a cousin-in-law, Catherine Tignor, and her son is the Superior Court Judge Robert Tignor. There are other Tignors about. There was one Tignor who was active in Prince George's County politics, and the name is sufficiently odd so that I just assume that we're related, but I've never met her. But there are some Tignors still about. All the folk will remember a Madison Tignor who taught and was a major presence at Dunbar High School for many years.

Mr. Poe: Now, did you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Duncan: No. I was an only child.

Mr. Poe: I take it you were quite close with, and remain quite close I should say, with your mother.

Mr. Duncan: Oh indeed. Absolutely.

Mr. Poe: She lives in the area?

Mr. Duncan: I'm sorry?

Mr. Poe: Is she living in the D.C. area?

Mr. Duncan: Oh yes. She lives, as a matter of fact, it's not very far in terms of houses – she moved, when she married Todd Duncan, from 473 Florida Avenue to 1600 T Street, Northwest, and that was in or about 1934. They moved to 1600 Upshur Street, N.W., in or about 1958 and have lived there ever since. My stepfather Todd died in 1998, and my mother still resides there. And when they moved to 1600 Upshur Street, I was living at 1812 Upshur Street, just two blocks up the street. I lived up there until 1995 when we moved down here to this house.

Mr. Poe: And we're here in –

Mr. Duncan: We are here in 1362 – we're here in Arundel on the Bay. Myrtle Avenue. This is my parent's former summer home. They having acquired this property – they, now, I'm talking about Gladys and Todd – having acquired this property in or about 1954 or 1955, and it was their pride and joy. They both loved it very, very much. My mother just lavished care on it. My father loved to work out in the yard. They both were great fishermen and crabbers. And there came a time when they were of the nature they couldn't use it, and the house just went unused for a couple of years, and my wife Pam and I decided to accept my father's offer and just move down here, which we did.

Mr. Poe: Very nice. And I should say that we are looking out over the bay as we speak.

Mr. Duncan: Right.

Mr. Poe: On a beautiful, sunny Saturday.

Your mother's name, I take it then, her maiden name was Gladys Jackson?

Mr. Duncan: Nancy Gladys Jackson.

Mr. Poe: You mentioned her marriage to Todd Duncan, the singer. If you could talk about that a little bit, and Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Duncan: First let me say overall that given my age when he came into my life, eight years old, he and I became very, very close and I never think of him as my stepfather, I think of him as my father.

Mr. Poe: I see. No offense intended.

Mr. Duncan: No. No, no, no, not at all. Not at all. A lot of people who only met me in later years were surprised to find that he is my stepfather. But I never dissembled about that, and it's just a wonderful relationship that I've had with him. He was a professor of voice at Howard University, and according to the story, my mother became a voice student of his. She sang, because she had always sung in the choir, as I remember very vividly, she sang in the choir and had a rather nice voice. Whether she innocently went there, or whether she had ulterior motives, I don't know, but the story is that very quickly she was his last student of the day [laughter], and they became very friendly. In one of his biographies, it's

stated that he always, after the second or third lesson, he said “May I kiss you?” You know how these things get cleaned up, and I don’t know exactly happened, but in any event, they did get married in June of 1934. And they had a very lovely, lovely life together. Shortly after they were married, he was “discovered” by George Gershwin, and in 1935, he created, as they say, the role of Porgy in the original *Porgy & Bess*, having interviewed with Gershwin, and his career sort of took off from that. He immediately went into concert work, and between the late 1930s and by the mid- to late-1950s, he sang all over the world to great acclaim. Much more so overseas than here because, again, he performed at the time of Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson – you know, racial situations, segregation, the whole business.

Mr. Poe: Limited, but strictly limited to where he could perform?

Mr. Duncan: In this country. But overseas he was quite a success. He appeared in a couple movies. Not big ones, but some movies. He appeared in one of the, the first revival of *Porgy & Bess* in 1940, 1941. And then he was in a couple of movies, *Unchained*, *Cabin in the Sky*. I’m sorry, he was on the stage in *Cabin in the Sky*. He was in the movie *Unchained*. He was not in the movie *Cabin in the Sky*. He had quite a successful career, very well known.

Mr. Poe: Was his career, did it take off after he met Gershwin? He was a professor at Howard then. And the *Porgy & Bess* experience led to fame, I take it.

Mr. Duncan: Absolutely, a big break. It was a biggie.

Mr. Poe: Sure.

By the way, what's your date of birth Charlie?

Mr. Duncan: October 31, 1924. Halloween, by the way.

Mr. Poe: A good day.

Mr. Duncan: Absolutely.

Mr. Poe: You mentioned the segregation that your father Todd Duncan experienced as a singer, and growing up in D.C., obviously you lived in times of strict segregation as you mentioned, and what are your thoughts, as you look back on your childhood, about those experiences?

Mr. Duncan: Well, you know, time passes, things change, attitudes change. The story is, it's a very common story, kids who were my peers, and you will hear this repeated 10 years, 20 years later, of kids the same age, our parents went to great lengths to protect us from segregation. It was never openly talked about as such. We used to go downtown to shop, for example, but you couldn't eat at the lunch counter, and different parents handled that differently. "Why can't we sit down and eat at the lunch counter?" "Oh well, let's wait until we get home because the food at home is better." To this day, I remember that you couldn't go to the bathroom anywhere, in any of the stores downtown. And I'm talking about Woodies, and Hecht's, and there was a Lansburgh's then, and something called Palais Royale. And they were all over on the 11th and F Street area. And the present public library on Mount Vernon Square – what is that? H Street?

Mr. Poe: 7th and Mass.?

Mr. Duncan: Yeah, that library, that beautiful building which is still there, was then the central public library, the main public library. And many a time, I walked in there, you know, just holding it until you could go in and go down to the basement and go to the bathroom. To this day, walking by that place, I remember that. Very, very funny.

I was saying that we were protected. We had our own life. There was U Street, and movies for us, at the Lincoln, Republic and Booker T. You would go downtown occasionally, but basically you stayed uptown. You only went downtown to go shopping for clothes, or something like that. You did not go downtown to go to the restaurant, because you couldn't go to the restaurant. You did not go downtown and go to the movies, because you couldn't go to the movies. So basically, it was just to shop. Public transportation in this city was not segregated, interestingly enough. And I don't know historically why that was so. But in any event, that's just the way it was. I grew up that way. Everyone grew up that way in my peer group. And I went to public schools. I went K-4th grades to Mott School, which is still standing, although it's been rebuilt. Fourth through sixth grades to Morgan School, which is, I think that's gone through an incarnation, it's now called something else, at 18th and Champlain Streets, N.W.

Mr. Poe: I think Mott School was at 4th and Bryant?

Mr. Duncan: Mott was at 4th and Bryant Streets, right. And, then I went to Garnet-Patterson for 7th through 9th grades. It's still there, at 10th and U Streets,

N.W., at Vermont Avenue. So, you know, who knows what scars you grew up with, but whatever ones there are, are the same ones that all black kids had at the time. Again, you know, I'm talking relatively well-to-do people at that time.

Mr. Poe: Well, and that's – I wanted to get to that. You obviously came from a relatively well-to-do, highly educated family. And what was, from sort of a class perspective, do you have any thoughts about that? Because obviously within any racial group there are class distinctions. What kind of experience growing up in that regard can you recall?

Mr. Duncan: Let me put it this way. When I graduated from Garnet-Patterson and went away to a preparatory school, it was one of these preparatory schools where you had work assignments, and I got assigned to the classroom building cleaning toilets! And I reacted volubly. I said, "I don't clean toilets. Where I come from the maid cleans the toilets." And that was literally true. From the time I was born we had a live-in maid and, so, I don't quite know how to play the class angle, but there isn't any doubt but that I, and people I still am friendly with, were of an upper-middle-class in black society. I'm not comparing it to white society, but certainly in black society. And I was raised in a very elite way. There were things I couldn't do because – I couldn't join the Boy Scouts because the local Boy Scout colored troop was not made up of the same class of kids that I came from. All of us – not all of us, but it was quite common for the girls to take piano lessons at Nickerson's and for the boys to take violin lessons

at Howard University. Not everybody, but I mean it was the kind of thing we did. I was taken to Constitution Hall and had to sit in that little segregated section up in the balcony. Every time Gloria Perkins or Yehudi Menuhin, or any child violin prodigy came to town, you know, you'd go down and hear that, because, you know, you played violin. So, there was a class structure, and there was an interesting overlay of color, which was true then; it's still, to a lesser extent, still true.

Mr. Poe: Now, did you have any interaction with whites to any significant extent?

Mr. Duncan: No. Practically, no. The only – as a child, the only interaction you would have with whites at all would be in downtown stores, the streetcar conductor, or the – what used to be called in those days without any malice on our part – “the Jew’s store,” meaning the corner grocery store. This wasn’t the days of, you know, the big Giants and the big Safeways, but the DGS – the District Grocery Stores – little neighborhood stores all over the city, in black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods. And they were called “Jew stores” because more often than not, or quite often, a Jewish couple would own a store. And that would be the only contact with white folks, that I recall.

Mr. Poe: And the name was a means of identification that was generally accepted, and not anything –

Mr. Duncan: I said, and I mean it, it had no negative connotation whatsoever. It just didn’t. I mean it was just called the “Jew store.” It was owned by Jews.

Mr. Poe: Well that's very interesting, now, in this day and age, a lot has changed over 50 years or more, obviously, in dramatic ways. And at the time, though, that was – I take it people interacted in a way, for example, the owners of the store were aware that – I take it – that that was what their stores were called, or do you know?

Mr. Duncan: I don't know, but it would shock me if they did not.

Mr. Poe: Yeah, and I'm sure it was – it sounds as if groups sort of accepted, they accepted roles in social structure. I'm just curious about the way – I'm trying to figure out the way that different groups related, and it sounds like they related fairly –

Mr. Duncan: Well. Well, you've got to remember that the neighborhoods were basically segregated, and there were mixed blocks, or one block would be black, and the next block would be white, but basically segregated. So the store owners, who were in those neighborhoods, knew who they were serving, and they had no problem with it. You know, they were in the business to make money. That's the way the people got their groceries, by and large, in those days. And they used to extend credit. You know, run tabs, or whatever you call it. Tickets. On a tick. That's right. On the ticket.

Mr. Poe: That means what? That means a tab?

Mr. Duncan: Yeah. Your parents would pay at the end of the week, or the end of the month, whatever the practice was. I remember almost by name, two or three couples who were in the store that we patronized, they were very nice people.

Mr. Poe: You mentioned going to Garnet-Patterson. Did you go abroad one year?
While you were there?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: Where did you go?

Mr. Duncan: Let me first say that when I talk about – this is further responsive to your earlier question – when I talk about growing up in a segregated neighborhood, I always point out that the schools in those days, the segregated schools, were just first-rate. At Garnet-Patterson, grades seven through nine, I started Latin in 7B, that's the second half of the 7th grade, and by the time I graduated I had a year or two years of Latin. In English I had read the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* and at Christmastime – and I could still recite them – we learned Christmas carols, *Adeste Fideles*, in German – in Latin, I mean. And, so we got a first-rate education. That's another whole story. My mother was a school teacher. It was the only thing open to her in those days. She would not be a school teacher in this era because she could do other things. She could go into business, she could do this, she could do that. But in those days, the wives would be teachers and even a male Harvard-trained Ph.D. taught at Dunbar High School. That's all he could do is teach there. So we had an abundant supply of just first-rate teachers. All along the line, from Kindergarten through 12th grade. And, of course, at Howard University – you know that story, the same thing. And if you were the son or daughter of a public school teacher, then you got double special attention because, you know, they knew your

mother was so-and-so, so they made doubly sure that you learned. An interesting system.

Mr. Poe: Your mother taught in the D.C. public schools?

Mr. Duncan: She taught in D.C. public schools. Yes. Absolutely. As did my godmother, with whom I'm very close, and as did my first wife. I mean, I grew up in a schoolteacher family. My father, my stepfather, was in a sense a school teacher because he was at Howard.

You asked about going overseas. In 1938. I had been at Garnet for a year-and-a-half, or something like that, and my father was in a play in London, and he took me and mother over there, and we lived there for the better part of a year. The first few months that I was there, I just roamed around the City of London, and the Underground, and all that, and then the show went on the road, and they put me in school. They would have done that anyway, because you know, you couldn't just not be in school. So I had a half-year, three-fourths of a year, of British schooling so that by the time I got back and graduated from Garnet-Patterson and ready to go to college, I not only had – I'm sorry, to prep school – I had this A#1 public school background, plus a year in an English school. So I was very well prepared academically, then, when I went on to preparatory school. And we only came back because of the imminent outbreak of the war.

Mr. Poe: This was in 1938, 1939?

Mr. Duncan: 1938, 1939. Yes.

Mr. Poe: You were how old at that time?

Mr. Duncan: Fourteen.

Mr. Poe: Do you have any recollection of how the social relationships you had, or that you saw your parents have in England, compared to your experiences here?

Mr. Duncan: Oh yes, it was totally different. In the first place, there were no – I have to say this carefully – there was no racial segregation based on color because the British, at that point, had not had any immigration problems, they didn't say anything about colored people. And the school that I went to, I was mostly an object of curiosity. "What color is your blood?" You know.

Mr. Poe: Did people touch your skin?

Mr. Duncan: Oh yes, absolutely. The kids did on the street, you know, other school boys. Beyond that, they were perfectly fine. It was my first experience in a non-segregated society.

Mr. Poe: Did you happen to come across any persons from India or the West Indies?

Mr. Duncan: No.

Mr. Poe: Any parts of the British Empire?

Mr. Duncan: No, my point is, and I said I'm going to phrase this carefully, as far as I remember, India was a part of the British Empire at that time, and I don't know that dark-skinned Indians, unless they were in diplomatic service – no, there wouldn't be any diplomatic service. I don't remember ever

seeing any Indians in Britain. Now, I probably did and don't remember, but it certainly wasn't a presence of any kind.

Mr. Poe: You found that, I take it, to be quite an interesting experience living a year over there.

Mr. Duncan: Oh absolutely.

Mr. Poe: So, you indicated the war broke out, and that's what prompted you, of course, to come back home.

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: You moved back to –

Mr. Duncan: Back to Washington.

Mr. Poe: To 473 Florida?

Mr. Duncan: No, they had – my father had died by then. When we went over there, we were living in 1600 T Street, N.W.

Mr. Poe: I'm sorry, you moved there in 1934.

Mr. Duncan: Yes, and so we just came back to there.

Mr. Poe: Now, when you came back, you went off to – how long did you stay in D.C. before you actually went off to prep school?

Mr. Duncan: It was a year or less. When I went away, I was in the 8th grade, when I came back I was in the 9th. And I graduated – with my class, as a matter of fact – in 1939, is that right? So it was a year. I finished Garnet-Patterson in 9th grade.

Mr. Poe: What do you think prompted your schooling, going up to prep school? And what prep school was it you went to?

Mr. Duncan: It was then called Mount Hermon School for Boys, and it was associated with a girls school called Northfield Seminar, which was located five miles away, but there was a common oversight. The schools are now combined, it's called Northfield Mount Hermon, and it's the largest residential – it's the largest prep school in the country. And it's, I would say, at the very top of the second tier, or very bottom of the first tier of school rankings. It's compared with Exeter and Andover and Choate, and what used to be Lawrenceville, and it did not – well, it didn't draw an Exeter crowd. I mean, Exeter was Exeter and it still is Exeter. But it was a very good school, and still is.

Mr. Poe: And that's what I take it your mother –

Mr. Duncan: Sent me.

Mr. Poe: I'm sorry?

Mr. Duncan: She sent me there.

Mr. Poe: She sent you there.

Mr. Duncan: Yes. She told me one day, "You're going to Mount Hermon." And I said "Okay, where's that?" A friend of hers had sent her son. And there was a little bit of a history of kids from D.C. going to Mount Hermon, so I was not the first.

Mr. Poe: And this was a – I take it they had good experiences so it became something that your mother obviously thought would be good for you.

Mr. Duncan: Yes. Now speaking of elitism, as good as Dunbar was in those days, Dunbar wasn't good enough for me in my mother's book, so I got sent away.

Mr. Poe: I'm sure very little was [laughter].

Mr. Duncan: Right. I got sent away to preparatory school.

Mr. Poe: And, did you get up there by train? How would you travel back and forth?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. The Montrealer would leave Union Station at 4:00 in the afternoon and would arrive at White River Junction, Vermont at 4:00 a.m.! And you would always be awakened by the porter and get up and get dressed, and get out in the cold, dark. The first time, by car, you know, your parents would take you up to school, but after that you'd go back and forth by train, for holidays.

Mr. Poe: So you'd spend, what?, September to June or so?

Mr. Duncan: No, September to – we didn't come home for Thanksgiving. We came home at Christmastime. And we'd come home again at spring break and then in the summertime. So between September and June, you'd come home twice.

Mr. Poe: And in terms of the, uh – how big was the class?

Mr. Duncan: My recollection is – 1,200 to 1,500 students overall. So a class would be 200 or 300.

Mr. Poe: So you'd have some familiarity at least with pretty much everyone in the class, and maybe some close friends, a few close friendships?

Mr. Duncan: Yes, oh absolutely. The classes were indeed small enough so you knew most everybody.

Mr. Poe: Did kids come from all over the country, or was it primarily East Coast?

Mr. Duncan: Well, primarily East Coast, but they made a point of trying to attract from all over. They were doing diversity before diversity was thought of, I mean it was something they did. It was primarily New England, but there were, you know, a sprinkling of kids from all over.

Mr. Poe: Any experiences there stand out in your mind?

Mr. Duncan: Well, I, you know, I think the real story of my life, a real interesting thing with my life, is that I've developed living on both sides of the street. I've lived in all black, exclusively all-black community, which was basically living in Washington up through Garnet-Patterson, up through junior high school, was basically all black. Then, I did a 180-degree turn, and when I got to Mount Hermon, it was all white, I was the only black person around. And, uh, so then I lived on the other side of the street. But because of the year in England, it didn't bother me. And because of the very fine academic preparation I had, I fit right in there academically. And I graduated. I was class salutatorian. I was number two in the class, and was a member of the I guess it's called the Formalities Society, like Phi Beta Kappa for prep school, and I played tennis all my life, and so I was on the tennis team, and I took up – I was introduced to skiing, and I learned to ski real fast, and I had a knack for skiing. I was also on the ski team, the varsity ski team, so I had a ball there. I was a BMOC [laughter].

Mr. Poe: Well it sounds like you would have been.

Mr. Duncan: And I say this not to brag, but I guess I was proud of it at the time. They used to vote in the class yearbook the most this and the most that – I was the most – I was five things – the Most Popular, the Most Versatile, the Most Likely to Succeed, a couple, two other things, I've forgotten what they were – oh, Most Respectful. Yes. I'm telling you this because there are some magazine articles around about this, you have this, as a matter of fact, because when I was introduced at the Bar –

Mr. Poe: You're speaking, of course, about the William Brennan Award you won, presented by the D.C. Bar last year, in 2001?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. The Bar president had run across this somewhere, in one of the Mount Hermon magazines. And he, you know, read that out. That was, I would say, that would probably, in some ways, be the most successful period of my life. Everything went right. In only three years, and I enjoyed it very, very much.

Mr. Poe: Everything went right, in the sense that life just felt –

Mr. Duncan: Academically, and uh, socially within the context of what was socially, you know, this was a New England, uptight preparatory school. Boys, you know. There were strict rules, and you couldn't go off campus. You couldn't put your foot off the campus boundary. So, you know, you didn't go into town and hang out on Saturday nights, or anything like that. You had work to do. So, yes, just everything went very nicely.

Mr. Poe: Cool. And the war's going on at this period of time.

Mr. Duncan: Yes. I remember vividly.

Mr. Poe: Did that have any effect on those three years, as you can recall, in any way?

Mr. Duncan: Um, I don't think at Mount Hermon it did because the war broke out in 1939, that was the same year I got there, '39, '40, '41, yes, it was my first year there. I should say that it's a four-year school, but it was very common to enter in the second year, and some people even came just for one year.

Mr. Duncan: You were asking if the war made any difference, and I was saying as a practical matter, it did not. That hardly seems possible, but if you remember, I mean if one was around at that time, for the first two years of the war, America was getting ready, you know, we went into a war production phase, we went into a draft phase, went into a manpower training phase, and we didn't show up in Europe until, you know, like, well, Normandy was, what '44, so it took a little while, you know, for us to get going. So it's probably not an exaggeration to say that at Mount Hermon, 1939-1942, in terms of the way our lives were affected, that the war did not have any effect on it. Now I'm sure that there were things that I was unaware of, like there was less sugar available. I'm sure that people who were concerned with procurement, in the kitchen, for example, had some problems, but nothing ever filtered down to us, at that stage.

Mr. Poe: Well you ended up, you mentioned, going to Dartmouth College.

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: And how was it that you decided to attend Dartmouth?

Mr. Duncan: Easy. Easy, easy, easy. I would've gone to Harvard, but I was big into skiing, and Dartmouth had a bang-up ski team in those days, so that's – and it was an Ivy School, so you know, what the heck. I went to Dartmouth. That was easy. That was a no-brainer for me.

Mr. Poe: And I take it you had your parents' support in going to Dartmouth, of course?

Mr. Duncan: Oh sure, of course.

Mr. Poe: You went straight from Mount Hermon, then, to Dartmouth?

Mr. Duncan: Mmm hmmm.

Mr. Poe: And what was your experience at Dartmouth like?

Mr. Duncan: In many ways, it was a continuation of Mount Hermon, in terms of academic – fitting in academically, you know, finding the work easy. Easy. I could've gone into the second year, it would've been easy. That part was fine. But by now, this is now 1942, the war has had a dramatic effect on Dartmouth. And if not when I got there, then shortly after I got there, there was a "B5" unit there, that was a – does that ring a bell?

Mr. Poe: It doesn't.

Mr. Duncan: Okay. In lots of schools and colleges, they were taken over by various branches of the military services. At Dartmouth, there was a, I think it was called B5 or B12 program. It was a pre-midshipman program, it was a midshipman program, really that's what it was. And the kids who went

into it finished their education and were commissioned. It's like ROTC. They were all over, everywhere, then, I mean the war was then underway full blast, the draft was in effect then, there were educational deferments, which I took full advantage of. The civilian population at Dartmouth shrank dramatically from 3,000 to 300. And the military population took up the difference because of the B5, B12, program I was telling you about; the only civilians who were left were either 4Fs – does that ring a bell? 4Fs?

Mr. Poe: That doesn't ring a bell.

Mr. Duncan: Geez! In the selective service system there were classifications. One-A was the highest, meaning you were ready to be drafted, the only question was when did your number come up. You were prime material. And when it was time, you went. Four-F was the lowest classification, and in some people's minds, the best. They were physically – something wrong with them. It was a physical deferment. They were ineligible for military service. And what I was going to say was that there came a time at Dartmouth when the only civilians at Dartmouth were 4Fs or people with educational deferments, which I had.

Mr. Poe: Now the educational deferments, was that something that was sought after or was there eagerness to join the war? What's your perception of that?

Mr. Duncan: It was very different. Do you remember Vietnam? How old are you?

Mr. Poe: I'm thirty-nine.

Mr. Duncan: Thirty-nine.

Mr. Poe: So I have a vague memory of, a fairly vague memory of the Vietnam war. The early 1970s I remember quite well. Toward the end of the war.

Mr. Duncan: And there hasn't been a big war since then. In the Vietnam era, just about anybody who was in college was deferred, just on the strength of being an undergraduate, and that's one of the reasons that Vietnam became so unpopular. You've heard that only poor kids and only black kids ended up in Vietnam. That's because they weren't in college. Everybody else was in college, so they didn't have to go. So that was a very unsavory aspect. In World War II, it was exactly the opposite. You have doubtless read and seen pictures of the day after Pearl Harbor, which was a Sunday. On that Monday there were long lines outside Army and Navy recruiting offices, people showing up, volunteering to join the Army, join the Navy, fight for their country. And that attitude by and large prevailed. I mean, most people – most white kids in my educational peer group – went into one of the military officers' training programs, B12, B5. And I'm just thinking of my friends at Dartmouth. They all became naval officers through the B12 or B5 program. I couldn't do that because the Army was segregated in those days. Among the white middle class, people more or less sought to join, avoided getting deferments, and fulfilled what they perceived to be a patriotic duty. My attitude was different, and I think on the part of most black people the attitude was different, the Army was rigorously segregated. You know from watching television and the History Channel, what did blacks do in the war? They were in the

construction battalion, drove trucks, or in the Navy, and I have a nice story about this coming up, in the Navy they went to cooks and bakers school. They were servants on board ships. They shined the officers' shoes and worked in the wardroom serving meals. That's all they ever did, and that goes back to the Philippines. It used to be that Philippine kids were mess men, but then when war came along, you know, the mess men were black. So there was really no – given my background, there was really no incentive for me to go into the military service. So I, and many others, black and white, sought educational deferment as a way of staying out of the Army. And I did it until they ran out. They finally called me.

Mr. Poe: So that was in the draft, uh –

Mr. Duncan: Yes. I was eventually drafted.

Mr. Poe: When did that happen?

Mr. Duncan: Oh, I blocked it for a long time, uh –

Mr. Poe: You think maybe February of 1945?

Mr. Duncan: February – no. '45? Yes, that's right. I finally was inducted in February of '45. That's right, yes, because I was commissioned. Yes, that's right. February of '45. Now, I've been a little fuzzy. I went to Dartmouth in September of '42, and I stayed at Dartmouth until in or about September of '44, and it was during that period that the civilian population dwindled down from wherever it was when I went there to 300. It was during that period that we went on – what did they call it? We went year-round. You finished college in three years rather than four. You went in the

summertime. Because everything was accelerated. Everything was accelerated, you know, get on with it so you could get in the Army. So, I finished three years in those two. And by then, rationing had come in, sugar, you know, the whole thing. The country had gone from '39 – idyllic, you know, lovely Pearl Harbor on a Sunday afternoon – Sunday morning over there – to full warfare. And all that was happening between '39 and '42, '43, '44.

Mr. Poe: By the way, do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was hit?

Mr. Duncan: Sure. I was at Mount Hermon. The time – yes, that would be right. I seem to remember it was early afternoon, that's right because there was a five- or six-hour time difference between Pearl Harbor and here. I remember 1:30, that's what time I remember. And that works because the actual attack was at, what, 6:15 or 7:15, and if you add six to that, that's 1:15, so yeah, that's right. 7:05, that's right. Yes, yeah. And I had gone to bed and was taking a nap. I'm not a big napper, but for some reason I was taking a nap. And I woke up and heard on the radio, or something like that, Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I remember vividly.

Mr. Poe: And do you have any – having lived through that, as well as September 11 of 2001, what kind of comparison might you make? In terms of the emotional reaction, I suppose.

Mr. Duncan: Well, you didn't. There was no comparison. I'm 15 years old. Neither I nor anybody else knew where Pearl Harbor was. And to say that Pearl

Harbor had been bombed, that sounded like not a good thing. There was no count, until a day or two later, over 3,000 people were killed there. So that number wasn't floating around. There was no television. You know, you couldn't tune it in and say, oh wow, look at that! So it really was apples and oranges. Contrast it to September 11 when my son called up, as I turned on the television, and in this chair, we saw the second, you know, tower hit. In real time! I mean, as it was happening! Yeah, having seen thousands of pictures of Pearl Harbor, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, newsreel, that scene we still see today, having seen *Tora Tora*, having seen *Pearl Harbor*. You have a much better sense of what actually happened then than we did on the day in question. When we heard it on the radio at age 15. Were the events comparable? Not really. One was a declaration of war, when there was a war going on. Remember a war was going on in Europe. And the Battle of Britain had already happened. France was occupied. President Roosevelt was saying for Christ's sake country, we gotta get in this, you know, come on guys, wake up. So, you know, if I were an historian, I would say to you, Pearl Harbor was much more cataclysmic than the Trade Center. Much more. Even though I think the number of people killed at Pearl Harbor was 3,000-something, wasn't it? I'm not sure.

Mr. Poe: I think that's about right.

Mr. Duncan: Yes, so the numbers, you know. But the implication of Pearl Harbor, to anyone who knew what was happening, even, you know, a kid, was very

different from that, very different. And I take some exception to Bush's having nominated the war on terrorism a war, saying the United States is at war. We're not at war. War means some kind of sacrifice. In this country war meant that everybody, everybody, even black people, everybody was in it together, you know. War meant your brother got drafted, you got drafted. War meant that the lady across the street lost her son. Killed. She had a star in her window. Everything was rationed. Gasoline. You know. EVERYbody was making a sacrifice. Some a supreme sacrifice. What's going on today is nothing, nothing. Bush was asked, what – early on, somebody said, "What sacrifice are you asking of the American people?" The only thing he could think of was, you know, putting up with longer lines down at the airport. So to me they're not comparable events. But it's horrible. We will have the newspapers of the next few days, in the front pages, we haven't thrown them out. We won't throw 'em out. I mean that's how much an effect it made on us. But you know, it's television.

Mr. Poe: Does the world move faster now?

Mr. Duncan: Sure. Sure.

Mr. Poe: Well, we were at your induction. Did you go –

Mr. Duncan: Excuse me. You may want to say what I just did because I think it's important.

Mr. Poe: Well I certainly will. What Mr. Duncan did was get up, go across the room, pick up a fairly substantial six-inch stack of newspapers and

magazines, and I think the rustling was evident on the tape, and every one of those was a depiction of the attack on the World Trade Center.

Mr. Duncan: It was *The Post* and *The Times* front pages from that week, and you know, all the news magazines, and *Newsweek's* in there. My point being that that had a fantastic effect, but it still wasn't World War II.

Mr. Poe: Well that says something about World War II for sure.

Mr. Poe: You went to the Navy, was that right? How was it – were you inducted into the Navy or did you have any choice in the matter?

Mr. Duncan: [snort] I was drafted into the Navy.

Mr. Poe: And you went to boot camp.

Mr. Duncan: Your question about did you have any choice, uh, strikes me as amusing. Because in those days you did not have any choice, and I wondered why you asked that, and then I remembered that in military recruiting today, pick your own career, go into whatever service you want to, you know, that sort of thing. Not like that. No, when I was finally drafted, I was sent to – I remember I was sent to Baltimore. I remember there was a group of six draftees, four white and two black, and I need not say who was put in charge of the group. But in any event, we got over there. Why Baltimore I can't tell you. And it was getting on toward the end of the war, and it was foreseen that the Allies would be victorious in Europe, and they were gearing up for the Pacific. This is February of '45. So that on the day that I was inducted, everybody went into the Navy because they were building up the Navy, and I'll never forget, as long as I live, I was going through a

line – you need to go through lots of lines of officers sitting at desks, stamping papers, and this and that and the other – and I was going through a line and a white commander or lieutenant commander looked at my record and saw that I had been to college. So he said when you get into the next room, take the RT test. You know, RT test. And I think by this point we had been separated by race. And only black people going into this line. And this officer said to me, get in there and take the RT test. So, in my mind, just you know being, riding out, this grilling academic career, a test was, I just ate tests up, I love to take tests, so we get in the next room. Big room. Several hundred black inductees. Somebody mumbled, “Does anyone want to take an RT test?” I put my hand up. The guy next to me put his hand up. You two, step over there. Turns out the RT test is a radio technician test. It was an aptitude test for being made a radio technician. This other fellow and I were sent to Great Lakes, Camp Robert Smalls. Everybody else in the room was sent to Perry Point, right up here. Perry Point was the cooks and bakers school.

Mr. Poe: Very interesting.

Mr. Duncan: Yes. And I came this far from being sent to cooks and bakers school. Which I wouldn't have tolerated. I wouldn't have tolerated it.

Mr. Poe: And what do you think would have happened had you ended up there?

Mr. Duncan: I don't know. I've often wondered. I've often wondered. I've often wondered. I don't think I would have been insubordinate because that's not my nature. I'm certain that I would've gone to somebody and said,

hey, I can make a better contribution somewhere else. Three years of college. You know, I – not to mention the maid-shined shoes, not to mention that [laughter]. But it didn't happen. Not only did we get sent to Great Lakes which was a regular midshipmen's – a regular boot camp, it was a huge one. Camp Robert Smalls was the colored one. I did get to the colored one, but it was still boot camp for the regular Navy, it wasn't cooks and bakers. So I just, you know, the luck of the draw.

Mr. Poe: Well how is it that you think radio technician was the only opportunity apart from cooks and bakers?

Mr. Duncan: No, no it wasn't the only opportunity. On that day, you know, your question makes me realize something that never occurred to me. Because I never became a radio technician. I took the test. Passed the test. It was just an aptitude test. And I suppose the white guys who took it were sent to RT school. I was sent not to RT school, just a plain old boot camp. That had never occurred to me. Never occurred to me. To the guy, incidentally, who also put his hand up, I said, "Why did you put your hand up?" He says, "Well, I saw you put your hands up." [laughter] We became friends, as a matter of fact.

Mr. Poe: Was everybody in that room at that point black?

Mr. Duncan: Black. Yep.

Mr. Poe: Well that meant you had some good sense, when he saw you put your hand up.

Mr. Duncan: Not everybody, not everyone is a redneck. [laughter]

Mr. Poe: So you were in Camp Robert Smalls. This was in Illinois?

Mr. Duncan: Yep. North of Chicago.

Mr. Poe: And the boot camps were actually segregated within Great Lakes?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: What was segregation like in the Army? It sounds as if it was strict in a way that couldn't be, even as bad as segregation was in society at large, it was strict in an even more deformed way.

Mr. Duncan: Well, an all-segregated military meant that your segregated unit got the short end of the stick. To be honest, I don't know where my boot camp classmates went because I left them. They went there and I went here. No, you weren't – you know, there were no Ku Klux Klan, but you just got the shitty end of the detail, whatever it was, you know, if there was something bad to be done, you got called on to do it. I don't mean you, I mean the unit, the whole segregated unit. It's the cooks and truck drivers thing. You know, there were not a lot of blacks in combat in World War II. By design. It was designed that way. The top people. It was just designed that way. There are histories and all written about the role of blacks in the military, and blacks as part of these histories, have fought in every war, including the Revolutionary War. You know Crispus Attucks, a black, who was the first person to die in the Revolutionary War. Certainly in the Civil War, blacks were on both sides. And in every war since, including World War II. You know about the Tuskegee Airmen,

I'm sure, and all of that. Doris Miller was a publicity stunt. Do you know Dorrie Miller? Did you see *Pearl Harbor*?

Mr. Poe: The movie? No I have not.

Mr. Duncan: There was this black guy, he was a cook, and when Pearl Harbor was attacked, he manned the machine gun. Never shot a machine gun in his life. He manned the machine gun, brought down a Jap plane. Was killed in the process. He was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Well, you know, we needed a black hero. Not "we," but they needed a black hero. That's a real famous man, Doris Miller. My point being that blacks were not trained for combat, and, by and large, didn't go to combat. I don't know the actual numbers, but if you look at film footage of World War II – the *Battle of the Bulge* – you will not see a black person. You will not see a black person. And that wasn't by choice of the black soldier. That was what was decided somewhere up the line what our role was going to be. And it was just a continuation of segregation and denial of opportunity that you had in the more general design.

Mr. Poe: Reflect another aspect of it.

Mr. Duncan: Yes. Which is why I was not – I didn't go down and volunteer the day after Pearl Harbor. You know, I'm not going to volunteer to be a truck driver or go to cooks and bakers school. Which was generally what would've happened. Generally. I had a chemistry deferment. I studied chemistry, which I hated and still hate. I never learned very much about

it, but if you were a chemistry major, you got deferred. And make no bones about it, make no apologies. If I could have deferred my way the whole way through, I would've done that.

Mr. Poe: When you ended up in Great Lakes, and you finished boot camp training, how long was that, by the way?

Mr. Duncan: Four months.

Mr. Poe: And then after that you went where?

Mr. Duncan: Then the other fantastic story picks up, which I think I've referred to. The Great Lakes company, as I recall it about 150 men, and our company commander, believe it or not, was a third-class petty officer. One stripe. The lowest petty officer you can be. It's like a one-stripe sergeant. He called me over to his office one day, and said, "Hey Duncan, this directive came through, and they're going to open midshipmen's school to the fleet," meaning enlisted personnel generally, fleet-wide, could apply to midshipmen's school if you had finished three years of college. Well it just so happened I had finished three years of college. And so I got my papers together and after a lot of – after some difficulty, I was accepted to midshipmen's school and sent off to Pearl Harbor, and was, in due course, commissioned in November 1944. Now I'm quick to point out that all hours of the ending of World War II, I was in boot camp, I was coming back from boot leave, on V-E Day, June '45, and I was in midshipmen's school on V-J Day, so I totally missed the shooting war, for which I am eternally grateful. But in both, in getting to Great Lakes and then going to

midshipmen's school, both because someone happened to say hey, do this and do that. Which it proves, you don't get through life on your own, or without help.

Mr. Poe: Well, I mean, couldn't you also characterize it as someone saw your, someone saw you, and had the insight to see – that it was easy to say to you, you know, anything other than --

Mr. Duncan: The first guy was thinking, this makes more sense for the Navy. This guy's going to college. Even though he's black, he's going to college. And the second guy, he had another motive. He also wanted to see me go to midshipmen's – he wanted to see somebody black go to midshipmen's school because that was a first.

Mr. Poe: Was he white?

Mr. Duncan: No.

Mr. Poe: He was the petty officer. Right.

Mr. Duncan: David Jakes. I will never forget. I often wonder what ever happened to him.

Mr. Poe: Well, at Cornell, how long were you there, in that midshipmen's school?

Mr. Duncan: Again, four months.

The same old foolishness continued. At Cornell, we – we meaning the midshipmen contingent – do you know Cornell?

Mr. Poe: I haven't been there.

Mr. Duncan: Okay. There's a quadrant, a group of buildings, over there, that the Navy had taken over, and they were cranking out midshipmen, you know, every

four months. And just routinely, you were given room assignments and ended up in a platoon alphabetically. The first 15 A's are in such-and-such platoon and are in rooms number 1-5, and so on throughout. [Mr. Duncan's laughing] There was one single room in the whole complex. One single room. So. I got that. But it took me out of the D's and put me down with the L's, as I recall. Kids all around me were L. So I rationalized that in my mind by saying I'd much rather have a room by myself than to be in with three or four other guys. And I did, as a matter of fact. I knew it was wrong, but I did. If this is the way they want to discriminate, that's okay with me. Sometimes it works to your favor too. Black people don't know that, but sometimes it does. And so I'm telling you all this because the second or third day that I was there we had to, again, get into one of these lines, and do something, I forget what it was, alphabetically. So for me to get in line alphabetically, I had to leave my group and get up where I should have been really. So when we finished the line and were outside, we lined up by platoon and marched off to wherever, and since everyone was alphabetical, they were all with their own platoon, except for me. I'm marching up with the D's, and I'm supposed to be with the L's, so I break ranks. Well, you're not supposed to do that. "What's your name?" "Duncan." "Duncan, you're on report." So I told him what happened. So anyway, I waited for my people to come through, and I got with them. Now I'm on report. That means you're going to be disciplined. An infraction. So I said, what in the hell? I had

not done – this wouldn't have happened to me if I had been assigned where I was supposed to be. It wouldn't have happened. So, I went – we had two officers in charge of us. And one of them was the one that put me on report. So I went up and said, “I would like to see....” I'm not making this up – “I would like to see the captain.” Somewhere along the way, I had learned that every enlisted man had the right to request to go over his commanding officer's head. You had that right. And I knew that. So I said, “Sir, I'd like to go speak with the captain.” “What do you want to see the captain about?” So I told him. That this had happened to me, that but for the fact that I was not with my alphabet group, this wouldn't have happened. I hadn't done anything wrong. Well, we didn't say I'm a victim of discrimination. We didn't say that in those days. But that was the rhetoric we would use now. But then all I said was I didn't do anything wrong; it's not fair, I've been penalized. So he said, “You don't have to worry, I'll take you off the report.” I said, “ All right.” The moral being, however, they never fooled with me after that. They NEVER fooled with me. A couple of times, “Duncan you're talking in line.” But other people got put on, I never got put on report thereafter. Crazy nigger, you know you'd go jump up and down, they don't fool with him. Another little benefit, you know. So I never had any problem after that. I did well economically, uh scholastically. The kids I was in with, no problem at all. You know, I'm sure that there was somebody there from Alabama who was uncomfortable, but what the hell, they adjust the same way I did.

Mr. Poe: You went –

Mr. Duncan: In November '45 I was commissioned. I was in the Navy.

Mr. Poe: What ship did you go to?

Mr. Duncan: Third story. By then, I was sent to an oil tanker. A ship of the line, so-called. Ships of the line, and ships of the train. Ships of the line were fighting ships. Battleships, destroyers. Ships of the train, cargo ships, oil tankers, supply ships. You know, support ships. And I was sent to an oil tanker, albeit a first-rate one. I learned that I and five others had been sent to midshipmen's school around the country – Cornell, New York, Columbia, I don't know where all – five of us. The first five I might say had gone to regular midshipmen's school. The other officers, black officers, were all specially commissioned – they were all sent over here, we were the first ones to go through regular midshipmen's school, and I learned, and I think reliably, that they were going to put us on ships to see if – this is again now we're getting toward the end of the war now, this is November, yeah, V-J Day is over, it's just a matter of the surrender on the Missouri had occurred, and now it's just, you know, MacArthur by now I'm sure is the High Commissioner of Japan, so, you know, doing a little mop-up, they want to see what happened if you put a black officer on a ship and see if plain enlisted men would take orders from him. Same thing as the Tuskegee airmen, can black people fly airplanes. Same thing. So that's how I ended up on this particular ship.

Mr. Poe: What was the name of that ship?

Mr. Duncan: *USS Platte*. P-l-a-t-t-e. A lot of tankers were named after rivers in those days. AO 24.

Mr. Poe: I'm sorry?

Mr. Duncan: It was designated AO 24. AO meant fleet oiler. O stood for oil. Oiler. Just like a battleship was BB, and a destroyer was DD. Oilers were AO.

Mr. Poe: I'm learning more and more as we go. [laughter]

How long were you on that ship?

Mr. Duncan: I picked up the ship, let's see, I was commissioned in November. I picked up the ship in December. As it happens, it was in dry dock. Up out of the water. So it was in December '45, and I left it May, June of '46. Sent back here (Washington, D.C.) to the Office of Public Information.

Mr. Poe: Mr. Duncan was describing before going to the Navy Department Office of Public Information what his experience on the *USS Platte* was.

Mr. Duncan: I would have to say that I had a running battle with the captain. A captain in the Navy is a four-striper, like a colonel in the Army, you know, one rank below flag rank. I think this particular captain was not thrilled to be commanding an oil tanker. He didn't have a lot of use for anyone in the Naval Reserve, which most of us were, not having been to the Naval Academy. And he certainly probably didn't have much use for ensigns, which is the lowest officer there is; it's like a second lieutenant. And he never even thought of the possibility of a black ensign. I'm sure that never entered his mind. Anyway, he came on the ship a week after I got there. I had been assigned as assistant navigator, and I get this order from

the executive officer that I'm supposed to tell the steward's mates – of whom there were six on the ship, and they were all black, referring back to what I said, all cooks and bakers school graduates, steward's mates, that's what they were called – I was supposed to tell the steward's mates that they could not come to the ship's party – the ship's Christmas party – which was being given out of funds from the ship's store. There was a ship's store that you bought toilet articles and clothes and stuff from, and it generated a profit, and that profit went into the ship's account. And the Christmas party was being given out of the proceeds from the ship's store. And the proposition was that the steward's mates would be given their share of the party in cash. This is San Pedro, California. So I said I didn't want to go to the steward's mates. Someone told me I was an assistant navigator, why do I have to tell the steward's mates? "Captain's orders." I said, "Okay." So, having refreshed myself on this story, I went back to my room, and I literally thought, I literally – the thoughts went through my mind, as I recounted before, that Charlie, he was a naval officer for a month, he had been a Negro, or black person, for 20-however-many years you are old, you're always going to be a black person. You're always going to be a black person. You're probably not always going to be a naval officer. So let's do it. So again, I went to the executive officer, who, by the way, I had learned had been to Mount Hermon, and so we had had a rapport. Again, I said I want to go see the captain, and he said, "What about?" and I said, "About this order about the steward's mates."

So he said, “Okay, good luck.” He set up the appointment, I went up to see the captain. I really was naïve, but it’s paid off a lot in my life. I told him what the problem was, that I didn’t think it was fair for the steward’s mates, who are black, to be excluded from a Christmas party for enlisted men, which was being given out of the proceeds from the ship’s store. And I even had the temerity to tell him that Mrs. Roosevelt had made a statement, parenthetically, which presaged what Truman did not too long thereafter, about desegregating the armed services. Mrs. Roosevelt had said something about we should stop discriminating against black servicemen – she had said something that, you know, what the policy ought to be. And I had the temerity to mention this to the captain, so he sat and listened, and having said my piece, and this is where the naïve part comes in, I stood up to leave. He said, “Sit down.”

Mr. Poe: He said, “You sit down?”

Mr. Duncan: He said, “You sit down.” And he proceeded to read me the riot act, which was that by act of Congress, as an inferior officer – and I’m using “inferior” in the inferior officer/superior officer sense – as a lower-ranking officer, I was obliged by act of Congress to give him my undivided loyalty and obedience. And I was not in a position to question any order that he gave. And that he would not court-martial me for insubordination this time, but if *ever, ever* I did anything like this, I would be court-martialed. So I think whatever wind was in my sails was taken out and I shrunk from my six-foot height, complete with epaulettes of one stripe, down to about

yay-tall. I dared not move because he said sit down. He went on to say that he had not given that order, that that order had been given by his predecessor, a departed captain, and as far as he was concerned, the steward's mates could come to the ship's party. I said "Yes, Sir." I've learned by now. And I was dismissed. Word of that got around right away, and I was an instant hero. Instant hero. With all the enlisted men. Not just the steward's mates, all the enlisted men. Ensign Duncan stood up to the captain. The new ensign stood up to the new captain. And I almost led a charmed life the rest of the time I was on the ship. Again, one of the benefits of being discriminated against. It was wonderful. It was terrific.

Mr. Poe: Well it's interesting you say that. I take it that was across racial lines, the respect you gained because of that, having stood up and done what you proceeded to do.

Mr. Duncan: Oh absolutely. Oh absolutely.

Ms. Poe: Do you think the captain fabricated his position that it was the prior captain's order? As a way to get out of this?

Mr. Duncan: I think he realized he was wrong. It doesn't matter. He didn't rescind it. He let it stand. He adopted it, let me put it that way. And I think that he realized it was wrong, and he was man enough to correct it. Now the lovely thing is, the steward's mates said "xxxx, we're not gonna go to the party and would rather have our money in cash." They didn't go. I loved it. Loved it. Win-win.

Mr. Poe: You said, a couple of times you said your approach was naïve, but one could also say it was courageous to take some of those actions.

Mr. Duncan: You could say that, yes. You could say that. But in my mind, I wasn't being courageous. I didn't look upon it as being courageous. I looked upon it as – I just didn't think of it – I just looked upon it as something I had to do. It was a duty, an obligation I had. I never thought of it as being courageous. It's like the people who march in – well, that could be a little different, the civil rights march. They were courageous because they were doing something they knew might get 'em hit in the head, whereas I wasn't taking that chance. It could be called that, but it wasn't courage that motivated me. It was correctness of duty.

Mr. Poe: Duty would be then the idea that to lead a life of integrity, I have to do this act?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: And I take it you always lived by that principle in your life, or attempted to?

Mr. Duncan: I suppose that as one went along, that principle diminishes, gets less and less. No, I'm not going to make that claim.

Mr. Poe: When we were off the tape, you mentioned you had a good relationship with a navigator who had his own problems, and was –

Mr. Duncan: I just meant as a Jewish officer, he was not welcome with open arms either. I imagine, I don't know anything specific, we may have talked for all I know, I just don't remember, but I mean the Navy in those days was

just very, very inhospitable to blacks and Jews. It was a southern, aristocratic tradition. The Navy was southern. The Navy today is behind all the other services in numbers of officers, and all of that. Admiral Zumwalt, you know, the Father of the Nuclear Navy, was Jewish; he caught up coming along. The last service institution to have a black graduate was Annapolis. Right at this very time. I mean we're talking about 1947. The first black. The Army had somebody in 1890.

Mr. Poe: It had a southern cultural character inherent in it?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. It was. It was. You know it's changed some. At that time, oh sure. Absolutely.

Mr. Poe: You went to the Office of Public Information. That was an assignment essentially, and you were still in your capacity as an officer?

Mr. Duncan: Oh yes. I have a funny feeling that that didn't just happen. My mother was always active in politics and, such as it was, she fancied she had some political influence. I'm certain as I sit here that they just didn't happen to pluck me off the ship in the Pacific and sit me behind a desk on Constitution Avenue at the end of the war. I mean, you know, that didn't make any sense at all. I talked to her about it, and she denied up and down that she had anything to do with it. I think she did.

Mr. Poe: Well, were you happy to come back home?

Mr. Duncan: Oh sure. I was going to come back home in six months in any event. The war was over.

Mr. Poe: I see. A little bit of an acceleration. And that was a desk job? Fairly unnotable?

Mr. Duncan: Mmm hmmm.

Mr. Poe: And you finished your time then in the Navy at the Office of Public Information?

Mr. Duncan: Yep. September '46.

Mr. Poe: Upon release, discharge I should say, you went back to Dartmouth I take it?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: And spent another year there?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. I had one year to go. I finished three clean, and had one to go.

Mr. Poe: And that went without incident, I assume.

Mr. Duncan: Yes, by and large. There was one thing that happened that I didn't have anything, really anything much to do with it. It was just funny, looking back on it. To the extreme being courageous; I think I'm chicken more than anything else. I was on the tennis team, and they had scheduled a tennis match with Duke. Duke had raised a fuss about it, you know, play with – so the tennis coach came to me and said, he told me what's happening, and he said, "We're not going to take you on this trip." Well, it was like the single room at midshipmen's school. As it happened, I was working like mad to get good grades the last year because my father had promised me an automobile if I made Phi Beta Kappa, and I really needed to kind of study; I did not want to go fooling around, plus I didn't play

very well, I mean we hadn't practiced, so I was delighted. But one of my friends got wind of this, no no no no no no, and he went to somebody, and maybe they went to the student newspaper. Whatever, the school did the right thing, they cancelled the match, you know, said we can't bring our team, we're not going to play you. But, I say, that wasn't my doing, it was just something that happened around me. If you said, "Did you ever feel any sense of discrimination at Dartmouth in your last year?" I'd say, sure, this happened, this happened, this happened, turn of events, story, all that, but without incident as far as I was concerned. Whatever happened is, you know, just run-of-the-mill stuff.

Mr. Poe: Stuff you had experienced before and you experienced after?

Mr. Duncan: Yes, and still experience. Routine stuff.

Mr. Poe: That raises sort of a big issue. How has the world changed, in terms of fair treatment?

Mr. Duncan: The world – I'm sorry, let me finish your question, I mean, I'll let you finish your question.

Mr. Poe: No, I think you understand where I'm going.

Mr. Duncan: In terms of what?

Mr. Poe: In terms of how issues of discrimination, issues of fair treatment of African-American people, of various social groups, do you think that the world has improved?

Mr. Duncan: Oh.

Mr. Poe: Or at least this social world?

Mr. Duncan: I think it has improved immeasurably and spectacularly. I can get some people in here who will argue that nothing has improved, that things are worse off than they were, that there are fewer black partners in law firms than there were ten years ago, that there – you know, this is worse, that's worse – and you know, I just don't agree. I think it's a very, very, very different world that you have now. If you are black, in this country, instead of 40% opportunity, there is 98, 99% opportunity. Colin Powell would have been a serious, albeit I think a defeated, presidential candidate. Twenty years ago, it would have been unthinkable. No one could have thought, no one could've conceived that. No, no, I think things have – you've got black millionaires now. When I was coming along, you know, you had Madam Walker and that was about it. You have CEOs, heads of corporations, you know, when I did my corporate thing, they got me and Vernon Jordan, and Bill Coleman, and Barbara Preiskel. We at least had been to law school. But now we get called to serve on corporations, because you've got people who are legitimate, bona fide corporate heads themselves who can now do that. Oh no, it's gotten a lot better. Perfect? No. It'll never be perfect. Never. I take my cue on that. I used to be a utopian when I was at Dartmouth. I used to think that things would get better and better and better and sooner or later everything would be fine, but not so, it won't ever happen. Minor contemporary kind of funny illustration. The Thomas Jefferson people, and Sally Hemings descendants, outrageous. You didn't need the DNA to establish paternity

on Jefferson's part. Short of an admission by him, historians, everybody knew that he was the father. It happened all over. Where do you think my skin color comes from?

Mr. Poe: Why don't you describe your skin color.

Mr. Duncan: I would call it dark brown, medium brown. It's not black is what I mean. It's not the color of an African from Africa, that's all I'm saying. And for every one of us, it means that we have some sort of mixed ancestry somewhere, and it's not just all Indian either. This is very common. Very common. And I think it's just humorous, ludicrous, but also humorous, that these people say well there's not really enough evidence, but maybe we could have another separate cemetery that they could be buried in. Oh I whooped when I read this. I said to Pam, "Pam goddammit," I said, "You people will never change!" I said here we are back to segregated cemeteries again. She laughed. So you know, it's never gonna – and more serious, and a much more deadly example is, I look at people of Jewish faith who have been objects of discrimination for 2,000 years. We only got 200 years' worth, they've got 2,000. And it's more virulent in many ways now than it was then. So I don't think that mankind will ever live in total racial, ethnic harmony, no. I think there's something in our nature that makes us antagonistic to each other. But specifically, as you put the question, immeasurably. Anyone who says it's no better, just ask them, would you rather be born now, or would you rather be born 50 years ago?

Mr. Poe: Well how did you decide when you were at Dartmouth where to go to law school?

Mr. Duncan: Easy. Harvard. Where else would you go? [laughter]

Mr. Poe: You didn't think about going to Yale?

Mr. Duncan: Nope. Nope.

Mr. Poe: It was clear as day that that was the place to be?

Mr. Duncan: In my mind at that time, it was the most prestigious law school. And I may say, I don't think I've said this before, that I only applied to Dartmouth, and I only applied to Harvard.

Mr. Poe: You knew where you wanted to go.

Mr. Duncan: That and I had enough confidence. Well, I had an excellent academic record, I mean how the hell are you going to get in there? And, quiet as it's kept, it was the little-bitty plus. Not a big one, but a little one. Even at Dartmouth and at Harvard. You know, they saw the handwriting on the wall.

Mr. Poe: Do you remember, by the way, when Jackie Robinson broke in?

Mr. Duncan: Sure.

Mr. Poe: 'Cause that was right around –

Mr. Duncan: Vividly. '47.

Mr. Poe: So this was a – that had a powerful effect, I would think.

Mr. Duncan: Sure it did. But I'll tell you who had a more powerful effect. Joe Louis. My recollection picks up at the time of the Schmeling fights. I don't

honestly remember whether he was champion or not when he lost to Schmeling. Do you remember offhand?

Mr. Poe: I don't. Wasn't this in the '30s?

Mr. Duncan: Late '30s, '38, '39. It was '38. In any event, at that time, black folk had precious little to be proud of as a group. I'm not going to say as a race because I don't believe in that concept. I think it's an invalid concept because it doesn't really tell you anything, and it's, you know, not genetically, biologically conferred. But as a group, as a people, as a race, as an ethnic group, black folk had very, very little to be proud about. We used to count progress in terms of whether there had been a decrease in the number of lynchings from the year before. This was *my* lifetime, I remember that. The Urban League and the NAACP used to keep count, "Well, there were only 13 this year, last year there 40, so we're really making progress." When Joe Louis would win the fight, Schmeling on – and I forget exactly when he became champ, I think he beat Braddock but I'm not sure. I was talking to somebody about this the other night. Along U Street, the minute the results came over the radio, and again, there was no television. We used to go out in the street and listen; you didn't have to be in your house, you could just hear, the minute he would win, the street would erupt. Erupt. In glee and jubilation. From 7th Street to 14th Street. It would be wall-to-wall people, all out in the middle of the street. I mean, this is unbelievable, but it happened. He created such a sensation, so much pride. It's hard, when you think back on it, that he could have

had that effect. Including me. So that when Jackie Robinson came along, sure it was terrific, it was fabulous, wonderful, but it really was a step along the way. It wasn't the first that it's thought to be. Joe Louis was the first who really brought forth racial ethnic pride. Jackie Robinson, yes. Everyone admires him. I could tell you the story of, you know, Dixie Walker and Pee Wee Reese, and all of that. But sure, he's a genuine hero. In many ways, he's more heroic than Joe Louis was because at least, you know, Joe Louis would fight and that was it. But Jackie Robinson was subjected daily, daily, as he played to, well you know.

Mr. Poe: It takes a special character.

Mr. Duncan: Oh yes.

Mr. Poe: Speaking of which, I'm jumping ahead here for a minute, but who's the first person in the legal profession you remember as standing out to you as a person of stature? A black person?

Mr. Duncan: That makes a difference. Black?

Mr. Poe: Yes, sir.

Mr. Duncan: [Thinking for a moment] George Hayes. Do you know the man?

Mr. Poe: I do.

Mr. Duncan: George E.C. Hayes. George Edward Chalmers Hayes was a black practitioner in this town. When I came in, in '53, Cobb, Harrod & Hayes was the name of the law firm. [Gets up to retrieve a book] "Simple Justice." There's a story about that Supreme Court decision. There's bound to be a picture of George Hayes in here, the famous picture you

will recognize it. There's a famous picture of Thurgood Marshall, Hayes, Nabrit, the three of 'em standing in front of the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954. Hmmm. Yep. There it is.

Mr. Poe: And this is in the Thurgood Marshall biography?

Mr. Duncan: Yep. That picture.

Mr. Poe: By Juan Williams.

Mr. Duncan: Yep.

Mr. Poe: Here's Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Duncan: He was a black practitioner, and he was in private practice when I came in and went in private practice. And this was really, this was before '54. This was before the school cases. Houston had died while I was in law school, and I should have known of him but didn't. I learned of him as an architect, as *the* architect, as the leading architect of the strategy leading up to *Brown*. Thurgood hadn't become Thurgood then. So George Hayes. I thought a minute. He immediately came to mind. I thought of him, and I would say it was him.

Mr. Poe: Well, and Charles Houston, after the fact, based on information you gained, but not at the time he was –

Mr. Duncan: Right. Well, he was dead when I came in. He died in '50. '49 or '50.

Mr. Poe: Do you recall what the cause of death was? Was it a natural death?

Mr. Duncan: I'm pretty sure it was.

Mr. Poe: Well you, you went to Harvard, but I know that you said you, your father said he'd give you a car if you graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and did you get your car?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: What kind of car?

Mr. Duncan: A Chrysler – it's called a Chrysler Highlander, and it was a two-door car, and it was called a Highlander because it had beautiful plaid upholstery, Highlander plaid upholstery. Beautiful car. Got pictures of it over there.

Mr. Poe: Now when you went to law school, were you married to your first wife at that point?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. I got married between college and law school, in '47.

Mr. Poe: And your first wife's name was?

Mr. Duncan: Dorothy.

Mr. Poe: Dorothy. If I may ask, how did that marriage come to pass? Had you known her for some time? Was she from D.C.?

Mr. Duncan: Yes, she was a D.C. girl, a young lady. And I had known her really from childhood, but we didn't necessarily pal around. I knew her.

Mr. Poe: Went way back with her?

Mr. Duncan: In terms of knowing her individually, yeah.

Mr. Poe: So you went off to Cambridge together then?

Mr. Duncan: Yep. My father said, "This is wonderful, you know, we love Dorothy, but what are you going to live on?" Meaning money. And I said I'm going to

live on love. He tells that story. I don't remember it, but that's what he says.

Mr. Poe: And you clearly managed to live on love then?

Mr. Duncan: Love, and 120 bucks from the GI Bill. That's what it was. \$90 if you were single, \$120 if you were married. Plus her mother was generous.

Mr. Poe: The time in Cambridge, I take it, was pretty important to you in your development, or was it three years that you passed?

Mr. Duncan: I didn't like it. By "it," I didn't like Cambridge. I don't mean I didn't like Harvard Law School. I only went to law school because I was running out of time, and had graduated from college, and what the hell. I looked upon it as a nice way to round off, or a long-term profession. After I got there, I developed a respect and affection for the law. I just didn't particularly like the law school. If I had it to do over again, I would still go into the law. Yale would probably have been a better match for me at that time.

Mr. Poe: Because of the size of the school? Because of the approach to education?

Mr. Duncan: No, not the size. I think the approach. Yale at that time had the reputation of being more socially oriented, whatever that means, but they had that reputation at that time.

Mr. Poe: When you were at Harvard, that was a time when you became interested in the law, you weren't motivated to go into law because of any specific thing that happened?

Mr. Duncan: No, it was – well, minister, doctor, lawyer, preacher, teacher. I had those choices. My father was a doctor, Dr. Tignor, and I sort of grew up in his

office as a little kid. He had an office in the home; when he wasn't there, I'd go in and play with the instruments.

Mr. Poe: He was a general practitioner?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. Looking at anatomy books. So I just didn't want to be a doctor. Preaching, I thought, was certainly not for me. Teaching is what I really would have done, and maybe should have done. I've always liked teaching, but I realized it had economic limitations. Even then, I was not very money-conscious, but then I realized I couldn't do very well being a teacher, although I had no idea whatsoever of doing very well.

Mr. Poe: During the time you were at Harvard, you obviously had summers off, I would think, in between your first and second years. Did you choose to do anything specific?

Mr. Duncan: I had my very first, absolute first job. I guess you call them summer interns now, but that's not what they were called then. For the National Labor Relations Board. For two summers I worked there.

Mr. Poe: In the General Counsel's office, or for the Board itself?

Mr. Duncan: Neither. It was neither. It was in something called the Order Unit. That little part of the shop that actually prepared the NLRB orders, physically prepared the orders. It may have been organized under the General Counsel's office. If so, I didn't know that, and it had no significance.

Mr. Poe: Were you thinking about being a labor lawyer at that point?

Mr. Duncan: No.

Mr. Poe: Just something you happened to line up.

Mr. Duncan: It just happened to happen. I don't even remember how it happened.

Mr. Poe: When did you matriculate at Harvard Law School?

Mr. Duncan: September of '50, no September '47.

Mr. Poe: And you graduated in the Spring of '50, June of '50.

Mr. Duncan: May of '50.

Mr. Poe: At that point had you formed any interest in doing any particular kind of legal practice when you graduated?

Mr. Duncan: No. I didn't know that much about it. In fact, I didn't line anything up.

Mr. Poe: This was more of a – your time at Harvard I take it was – you were taking classes, becoming immersed in the law; it was studying, doing the things that any person does making their way through law school?

Mr. Duncan: Basically. I look upon it as trade school. I also just got married, so my attention wasn't fully on the law. We also had our first child during, or at the end of our first year, so there was a lot going on. And nobody ever told me about law review or you were supposed to work hard, you know. I just thought it was a continuation of Dartmouth and studying, and –

Mr. Poe: And all the clerkship, review, and all that?

Mr. Duncan: I didn't know about that. That sounds stupid, but I didn't. I'm sorry.

Mr. Poe: Well, no, if one is not plugged into something, then one doesn't know about it.

Mr. Duncan: And again, see even that has a racial overtone. It was just not something that – I can't generalize about black lawyers, that's not true. Bill Coleman was a year or two ahead of me, and he clerked for Frankfurter, but he was

on law review, so therefore, he knew about law clerks, but when I got out of law school, I didn't know anything about clerking for anybody. It was never mentioned.

Mr. Poe: I'm looking at something here that says that Bill Coleman graduated from Harvard in '43. Does that sound –

Mr. Duncan: I don't think that's right, and if he did, he was still around when I was there working on his LL.M. I had thought that he had stayed on for a year which means he would've graduated in '47, maybe, or '48, but I'm not sure of that. I'm not sure. It may be he had taken off a couple of years and then came back.

Mr. Poe: Your son was born in 1948? '47?

Mr. Duncan: We got married in July '47. He was born in September '48.

Mr. Poe: And that was the beginning of your second year of law school?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Poe: Well then, you were a busy man.

Mr. Duncan: Oh, very busy.

Mr. Poe: After Harvard, you went to New York I believe. What made you decide to go to New York, and what did you do there?

Mr. Duncan: What made me decide to go to New York was, again, I'm going to use the word naïve. I didn't know anybody in New York, never been to New York, but somehow I had convinced myself that New York City was the only place to practice law. The only place to practice law. The placement officer at the law school –

The practice in those years was that during the Christmas vacation of your senior year, your last year, you would make the rounds of whatever law firms you were going to interview, and hopefully would have a job by the time you graduated. The placement officer at the law school, being a little ahead of his time, sent me to 15 – 10, 15 – the usual number of the top New York law firms – Cahill; White & Case. The one I liked was Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft; Donovan Leisure; the firms most of which are still around; Cleary Gottlieb. And to a person they all told me, “Mr. Duncan, we are ready to hire a Negro, but our clients are not, so therefore, we cannot extend an offer to you.” Right up front. I really appreciated it, no line, you know. “Oh, we’d like to, but you came in third out of two.” They didn’t do that. Their clients were not ready. Now the fellow who sent me on this wild goose chase, he knew that’s what was going to happen, but he thought that it was good for them and probably wouldn’t hurt me, just, you know, that’s practice, process.

Mr. Poe: He probably thought it was good for the law school.

Mr. Duncan: And the school, yes, and the school. I ended up at Rosenman, Goldmark, Colin & Kaye. Rosenman being Samuel I. Rosenman who was an advisor to President Roosevelt, and who was himself a New York State Supreme Court judge. Supreme Court meaning trial court. And I don’t know how we got together. They did what nowadays would be called affirmative action, because normally they only hired from law review, and I was not on law review. For whatever reason, they said, “Well, let’s give this guy a

chance.” So that’s how I ended up there, and I stayed there for three years. Oh, I know what I wanted to add. I didn’t make law review. Maybe I could not have. Let’s assume I could not have, but given my academic record up to that point, I think if I had worked on it, I might have, let me put it that way. But again, no one ever told me that this was important to do. I ended up in the upper fourth of the class. Almost, and this is the one thing on my résumé that if anyone ever did the math would be a little bit of a lie. I’m proud of this. They used to give a class ranking, I mean numerically, one through 500, or whatever the lower person was based on your grades. How they cut it that fine, I don’t know, but they did. And let’s assume that there were 500 people in my class, so the top fourth would have been 125. I was 126 or 127, but always said I graduated in the upper fourth of my class. No one ever called me on it. So I wasn’t law review, and I, you know, wasn’t at the bottom of the class either.

Mr. Poe: What was your time at Rosenman, at the Rosenman firm like?

Mr. Duncan: Oh it was fine, I just didn’t like it, I didn’t like the big-time law firm, I didn’t like the work, I didn’t like the kind of work I was asked to do, which was the same that every other associate in the world is asked to do.

Mr. Poe: Reviewing documents and such, drafting memos.

Mr. Duncan: Drafting memos. I remember what really said “I’m outta here” was I got a job – CBS was a big client of the firm, and the question was could CBS raise Edward R. Murrow’s salary from the then-level of \$50,000, which in

1951 was a lot of money – could they raise his salary during the term of his contract. I said, “Sure, why not? What’s the problem?” Ever hear about wasting assets, you know, he has an obligation to finish out his contract term for \$50,000, and to pay more during that term, you could argue was a waste of corporate assets. So I did that. Then I said enough already. I wanted to get in court. I wanted to draw wills. I wanted to get divorces. I’ll never forget that. That was my feeling. I wanted to practice law. And so I left and came here.

Mr. Poe: And here meaning back to D.C.

Mr. Duncan: Back to D.C.

Mr. Poe: And you ended up with doing what right off the bat?

Mr. Duncan: The real reason – I mean, the precipitating event was Belford Lawson – do you know that name? Belford Lawson, knowing a good thing when he saw it, extended an offer to me to come down and join his law firm, Lawson, McKenzie & Robinson.

Mr. Poe: And that McKenzie being –

Mr. Duncan: Marjorie McKenzie, his wife, still alive, who became a judge in the juvenile court. Marjorie McKenzie.

Mr. Poe: Robinson, of course, being the late Aubrey Robinson.

So you, and did you have any associates with you in the practice, or was it the three of you?

Mr. Duncan: The four of us. Three of them and then I joined.

Mr. Poe: How long were you there?

Mr. Duncan: Three months.

Mr. Poe: Would you like to discuss that at all?

Mr. Duncan: Yes I will.