

Background on Interview with Professor Beiser

My interview with Professor Beiser touched on three events in Brown's history. It briefly discussed the withdrawal of African American students in 1968 and the events surrounding that event including the Third World Summer transition program that existed for the summer of 1969. We also momentarily discussed the disciplinary hearing that Professor Beiser chaired in 1970. The disciplinary hearing was held on the topic of student obstruction of a university building. Students prevented military personnel from interviewing Brown students to protest the Vietnam War. In this hearing the students were given punishments and the punishments were then suspended. The final topic, which took most of the interviewing time, was the student takeover of University Hall in 1975. Professor Beiser served as an official legal observer for the student protesters during the negotiations resulting from that event. In the interview professor Beiser tended to digress into his personal memories and anecdotes about issues of race and the Vietnam War. He also provided many names of individuals connected with the events discussed.

Interview With Professor Beiser 12/4/01 and 12/6/01

Interviewer: Kevin Bennett, student at Brown University enrolled in Presidential Seminar
Interviewee: Edward Beiser, dean and professor at Brown University

12/4/01

Q: Briefly describe the tactics used in the 1968 student protest and your impression of their effectiveness.

A: They were very effective. They were effective by withdrawing from the University rather than doing the types of things that were going on at other Universities like building seizures and obstructive sit-ins. We didn't really have here. We did not have a building seizure. Certainly not in 68 and we did not then have to my knowledge trap anyone in their office like the President of Columbia was and so on. And they didn't have to bring in police to kick out the (something like protesters) and so forth. It was extremely powerful and extremely effective and morally powerful.

Q: in your opinion did white students support the protest in any way?

A: There must have been. I don't remember with any particular degree of specifics. There certainly were.

Q: In your opinion Brown's policy toward students of color change after 1968?

A: It changed rapidly in terms of admissions. Tremendous, I don't know...the numbers you can get. But my memory is that where there had been 85 blacks plus or minus in the entire four years of the college there were 100 plus admitted the following semester for the fall. And then there was also the creation of what became TWTP. The whole summer was devoted to (something like transition). TSP Transitional Summer Program. And it was overtly and explicitly for Negroes. It was said that we did not have the money to open it to all who would benefit from it. So by that point the university had clearly and publicly bought into the notion that there was a special obligation to compensate or increase the competitive capacity of African Americans.

Q: Do you think that Brown has regressed in this respect (or something like that)?

A: Affirmative Action as social policy went further than where we were in the late 60s. Maybe it has gone about as far as it is going to go. I don't know. I am fundamentally satisfied with what Brown has done with race relations.

Q: Did you feel that the Transitional Summer Program was successful?

A: At the time we certainly thought it was a good thing. I mean it was the enlightened thing to do. You can't admit all of those folks who come from these socially inferior backgrounds, educationally inferior backgrounds, and then just turn them loose and let

them flunk out. I don't know whether that sounds very very paternalistic and imperialistic. The ultimate goal was to have a colorblind society. But there was recognition that you couldn't just get there by...If I guy was running track and he wasn't allowed to compete, wasn't allowed to have fancy sneakers, had a ten pound weight tied to his leg, etc. and now you say alright we are eliminating formal segregation no more ten pound weights on people's feet, but if you didn't give him a coach and didn't give him access to a track and didn't give him the extra good sneakers or something like that then he wasn't going to make it and that was the vestiges of institutional racism. Institutional segregation.

Q: Should there be another Transitional Summer Program?

A: No. Should any program run again, any program like it? That's already, at least a question. I am completely comfortable with admissions with the notion of recruit...Basically what your asking me about is about what accommodations if any should be make particularly to African American students from high schools in terms of admissions and you know, we may have reached a point where simply in terms of admissions standards I don't think we should be deviating. I think the standards of admissions for students should be colorblind. That I have no trouble with. I think we can legitimately actively pursue recruits who are African American on a theory that their parents having be excluded or not made comfortable, that maybe you can justify special accommodations in getting them to apply. Getting them to think about subjects in which blacks are under-represented like engineering. In terms of admissions, who gets in once, you've gotten them to apply I mean...so that's from admissions. I am teaching a class which you know about which has in it too TA s of color one of Asian background. They are all medical students. We admitted them. They are all good. Every one of them belongs....every one of them. Would I say that we were not conscious of their race...no I would not say that. But do we absolutely should not admit anybody that we do not think can do a first rate job at Brown. That I am quite persuaded on. And I don't understand that the university has committed to Brown to doing other than that.

Q: You have mentioned a number of individuals...Charlie Nichols (spelling?)

A: Professor Dr. Charles Nichols. Professor Nichols was in Providence Rhode Island. He has been emeritus, retired, for a number of years. He was professor of (?) when I came here. Full professor. He was P.H.D. I guess from Brown. He was a path breaker. He was the first something.

Q: Dan Thompson.

A: Dan Thompson was an undergraduate. I think he was the vice president of the student government?

Q: Professor Churgin (spelling?)

A: Mike Churgin who is a Caucasian is professor of law at the University of Texas and one can reach him there. He is a guy who will, first of all I think that he was a roommate of Dan Thompson. Second, of all Michael will have remembered lots of detail that may be of interest to you. He graduated as a senior in I guess 69. That is a very sophisticated white student of the time.

Q A student by the name of Johnson.

A: Richard Johnson...He was also very knowledgeable politically. Him you can find in Washington. He is at Arnold and Porter and some stuff in Washington.

Q: Professor Sibulkin (Spelling?)

A: Norman Sibulkin, this would have been a little bit later. Sibulkin is a professor emeritus of engineering. Sibulkin and I and Ernest Ferichs, who also lives in Providence, has a very copious memory. We were sort of the political official leadership of the faculty, which was in confrontational mode with the former University President Donald Hornig. The faculty governance thing was called the FPG Faculty Policy Group and the three of us were the executives of this group.

Q: William Brown.

A: William Brown was a black. He was a graduate student when I came here. He was an older gentleman who had sort of worked in maybe some sort of post office and gone to Rutgers at night or something long before I met him. He was an example of what we called a middle class black who worked so hard to make himself advance and he was a sort of spokesmen for the minority students. Then he became this dean. He was in the dean of the college. Later that became very controversial. I am very cautious here because I am talking about people's reputations. Bill Brown passed away maybe some years ago from cancer or something. Bill Brown for many years was the black in the dean of the college for minority affairs. Maybe he was the first black dean. If he wasn't the first he was close. Was he qualified to be a dean? He never did finish his PHD. There was black faculty. Michael Harper is a name that comes to mind. He was among other things later the poet Laureate of Rhode Island. The most interesting Black faculty person was Walter Masey...Walter Masey went on from Brown. Walter Masey was a black physicist. That right away is saying a great deal. He worked on the Manhattan Project that is saying a great deal. He left Brown for the University of Chicago. He was dean of the college. When Mr. Gregorian was elected President the roomer widely had it was that Masey was the number one runner up after Gregorian. He is now the President of Moorhouse College in Atlanta.

Q: Jaqueline Matsfeld (spelling?)

A: Jacqueline Matsfeld who is a lady, a Caucasian. Jacqueline Matsfeld was the Dean of the Faculty. She I mentioned to you because when the building was seized in 75 she I mentioned to you because when the building was seized in 75 she became in name the

head negotiator for Brown. In practice the real head negotiator was Mr. Glicksman. Moriss Glicksman who was the dean of the graduate school who later was promoted to Provost. Jackie Matsfeld left Brown to go to Columbia as president of Barnard College. When she left Brown to a rather unsuccessful presidency at Barnard...Barnard is the women's college in Columbia...Barnard was, after all they hired her I mean after all she came (something like: come from us we are Brown). They made her their president. She apparently was not successful there. A member of the faculty at Barnard said to a member of the Brown faculty "we needed a lion and you gave us a Christian." That was a very funny line.

Q: Before 68 was it your impression that Brown had a negative admission policy towards students of color.

A: I am sure that I believed that Brown discriminated against Negroes. As they made it harder for Jews. I am sure I believed that and that I think I knew to be true. Asians didn't exist quote unquote. I was not conscious of Asians. They weren't par of the (something like: statistics).

Q: You were part of the UCSA and you presided over a hearing concerning student obstruction of military recruiting. The students were given punishments and then the punishments were suspended. As far as you recall what was the reason?

A: I think we chickened out. I mean on the one hand even the students the mention of obstruction was a strong word you must do that you mustn't do that. But then we were just not going to put our necks on the block over something like that.

Q: What do you mean by put your necks on the block? How would you have been putting your necks on the block?

A: You're being a clever interviewer or you're serious.

Q: I am serious.

A: Well there might have been a revolution, there might have been a demonstration, they might have broken a window. They might have made trouble. People I mean. Politics was very very confrontational. And yet I remember saying to you very specifically my story about the ROTC upstairs downstairs strike. Nevertheless there was plenty of scaredness. I told you that when I told you that when I went out that I got a round of applause for walking out to bring a message to the students that they were not to be let into the meeting because certain procedures had not been complied with and they could not come to this meeting, a meeting of the faculty. And I mean a number of...I have a certain arrogance...there was a meeting in the hockey rink...Meehan auditorium...Meehan auditorium I think seats 3000 people or something like that. I digress. The Meehan auditorium reminds me of graduation. The only time I can remember graduation being moved indoors was the year...my first graduation...68 or 69. Henry Kissinger, then Secretary of State, Vietnam policy, got an honorary degree. Many

seniors stood with their backs turned to him. They were tough times yeah. Again, not as bad as but certainly confrontational. The story is that at commencement in the First Baptist meeting house, you know about that? The student speaker, maybe it was Magaziner, maybe it was a different student speakers. A student speaker was berating the president and I did not see this but I heard this. His wife was sitting in the front row crying. The front row of the church. Whomever it was I don't know was going on and on and on severely critiquing the University and all its problems and so on. The story is that immediately after that graduation in Heffner's home, the President's residence, he said to several senior corporation members "I guess maybe I should resign," and they said "maybe you should Ray" and that's how he was out after three years as President. So anyway...70 for me is Vietnam not race really. Anyway, I saved the University's ass I choose to believe, even though it's not clear that history will ever believe it, but I believe it, a little bit. There were 3 thousand, there were 2 thousand, there was some large number of people, there was microphones on either side, speak, speak, speak, speak. I got up and said my name is Beiser. I am a teacher of political science, and I would like to make the point that this is not a strike against...(too me something like: this was when we Kent State voting a strike)...This is not a strike against Brown University. This is a strike at Brown University against the war. Yay...very very well received. Totally changed the tone of the meeting.

Q: this was a faculty meeting?

A: No, this was a meeting that was called for a speakout or something.

Q: Let's move to 75.

A: 75

Q: You have sketched out a bit about what you remembered of the atmosphere around the protests and the negotiations. It was around spring weekend I believe.

A: Yep.

Q: Could you elaborate a bit as to what was the feeling on campus?

A: After the building was seized: University Hall, and then we were in negotiations and I told you how but I can repeat it if you need it. The agreements of 75 list I think four persons as official invited observers. I was one of them. I was J.J.'s observer. Meaning he brought me in. One of the underlying themes in the negotiations was fear that there would be violence on campus associated with spring weekend. The building was seized about a week before spring weekend and the question was should the University, Spring weekend was a heavy drinking time. It was the fraternities look forward to their parties, and there are faculty, I might even be able to find one for you, whose job, who were designated to go to the frat houses where there were bars and on Thursday night, before the, lets say the Friday, which was going to be spring weekend, asked them to stay sober, maybe not to drink. I don't know if they tried to go dry or not I don't know. But there

was fear some of the guys were going to get baseball bats and come up and liberate the building from these stinkers that are taking it over. So there was that fear and nothing ever materialized of it. Professor Frank Rothman, chairman of the Biology Department, then went on to be the provost. He winters in Florida now. He would be a good person to talk to. He has recently retired. He was one of the faculty that went frat house to frat house, kind of hung out with the guys so to sort of keep things quiet. But at the same time I also told you the story that the Graduate Record Examinations were locked in the vault of UH and you know it's a hell of a revolution when you stop and arrange for some person, the registrar or somebody to go in the window and get out the books and swear that sanctity of the virginity of the graduate record exams had not been violated.

Q: You mention that there were certain people who were concerned about members of fraternities getting drunk and...who would it have been aimed at?

A: At the students who seized the building. Yeah. I am sorry I thought it was...When it was all over Friday night. It was Friday night and there was this document produced of agreements there was a very very positive feeling a feeling of great relief, but minority kids were scared that they were going to get beaten up and taken on and so on and there was a lot of attention to how exactly we were going to announce that an agreement had been reached. I will tell you the following and this is true. I haven't thought about this in a long time. Who would make the announcement. After it had all been agreed to, whatever is on that document. How would it be announced? The ranking University representative was Dean Matsfeld, a white woman. There was discussion as to who would announce what. Should Glicksman? Should Matsfeld? How would it be photographed? One of the senior administrative public relations people from Brown said, I was there when he said it, We don't want a white woman to stand surrounded by black men and announce these agreements. Got this? He is a good guy, I won't tell you who. He is a liberal. He isn't here any more. He is long retired. He was being. We don't want the wire services to pick up the photograph: Brown University capitulates or reaches agreement or anything, and the photograph should be a white female administrator surrounded by black men.

Thursday 11/6/1

Q: You were talking about the 75 negotiations and the different parties involved. What were the different goals of the groups during the negotiations? As far as the administration you talked about some people specifically being against quotas. What was your recollection of what was at stake?

A: I don't remember. The substantive issues are reflected in the document. Namely, I bet namely, enrollment, faculty, numbers of faculty, which was always very very contagious because there was always the argument about can you get qualified faculty. Why can't you? Are there such people? There was real resentment on both sides I think.

Q: What was the break down racially among faculty members?

A: There weren't any. Next.

Q: There weren't any?

A: There were. There weren't any. (inaudible). I bet there weren't five. There were very very few. In 1976 I was at Harvard and there was an issue of the Harvard Crimson which reported the following statistic. Take it that it was the Harvard Crimson. Take it they may have gotten it...Harvard admitted in all of its academic graduate schools that year that is not the law school not the business school. Academic graduate schools, PHD in history, PHD in chemistry. Harvard admitted in 1976 12 black persons total in all of its graduate schools. That means that if every one of them finished a PHD in five years, not a single one of them dropped out. That meant that Harvard graduated in all fields, in arts and sciences, 12 African Americans five years later. Now yes, Harvard is not the only place producing. But Harvard realistically producing 5 a year in all fields then the department of psychoceramics was not about going to...It isn't as if there was lots of qualified minority students and candidates out there waiting to get their P.H.D.'s to come to teach at Brown, is the way people would have said it. And on the other side, there was some resentment that if you wanted to find them you would and you could.

Q: How did the faculty react to the whole protest of 75 (I missed the end of the question)?

A: There was a lot of participant, there was resentment, there was some at the time I thought was ill spirited, ill considered, and wrong. And now that I am middle aged plus I am not so sure it was ill considered. You're looking for groups and blocks. There may have been sort of a more liberal and...I interrupt. I was interviewed for something or another for some kind of a talk show or something. Not necessarily on these issues not necessarily in 75 but around then. I was interviewed on the talk show and there was a discussion of why are all the...a phoner inner called in and said why are all the University students left wing or something like that. And I said without any real thought, gee that's not true. There is a wide range at Brown from the SDS on the left to Rockefeller Republicans on the right. Pause. Rockefeller republicans on the right...not very right. So I wasn't perhaps so sensitive to division...so sensitive as I might have been.

Q: Did any faculty actively support the students' protest?

A: Oh, I am sure they did.

Q: Did that bring tension to the administration (roughly) or was there administrative pressures for a unified response that you recall?

A: I don't have a...There was a lot of energy. I remember a lot of energy, and a lot of discussion, and a lot of meetings, and still more meetings, and then there were a lot of meetings, and I don't remember in any specific detail who was which faculty block and stuff. There was no block of minority faculty. There was a hand full of minority faculty. Minority there meaning black.

Q: In your facilitation role do you feel that it was successful? Do you feel like your role of advising the students was helpful or a worthy endeavor?

A: Yeah. It was certainly...I mean I feel decent about it. It was interesting. It was...I set it before, I insinuated (?) myself into it. I mean I wanted to play. Play chess not play peach (?). I wanted to play. I was able to play. I was able to...yeah I feel good about it. Less frivolously than I must sound now.

Q: How has the protest of 75 affected you? Did it change the way you viewed the school?

A: We were all friends when we left. I mean faculty students and so on. I was fine I think with both the people then and the institution and I am still here.

Q Did your view change at all?

A: Then or since or what do you mean?

Q Then. Well from before and after.

A: Probably not. Not a lot that I am conscious of.

Q: Do you think the students and the administration could have handled things differently or better?

A: Things could always be different. Better? Those were very difficult times. I had spoken on an earlier tape about mister Hornig, the president and...Maybe president Hornig was president at a time when no one could do the job. Maybe to be the president of a major university during Vietnam and so on. Kent state and so on. Race relations as part of but again I insist a lot of other stuff interwoven. I mean maybe nobody could have done a good job. I mean maybe he did a good job, as good a job as could have been done. Maybe he was the wrong man in the wrong job at the wrong time. Brown came out pretty well. Therefore I guess I think we handled it about as well as it could have been handled.

Q: Do you mean as far as perception (roughly)?

A: Well, I mean, places were being ripped apart as I said a number of times.

Q: Do you think there is a better way that students could affect change (roughly)?

A: Tell me what the question is. Do I think students should seize buildings? No I do not like it when students seize buildings. There has been some buildings. Of course at Brown there were brief building seizures at a later date...There was a time when they also seized the John Carter Brown and their was an injunction and the University came down tough and strong and I think totally appropriately. Yeah, I remember that.

Q: Do you think there is a better way to affect changes?

A: I don't understand the question.

Q: Do you think that the other things could have been as effective (roughly)?

A: Ah...it was a pretty mild building seizure as building seizures went and so on and given...I remember also that there was tension and I told you that. Could their changes have been accomplished otherwise? ...there were later committees one of which I think I served on to review the 75 accords. Yes?

Q: I don't think so.

A: Then I'll tell you to find it. The university is only at best a limited or special or nontypical representation of the broader world, the broader universe. There are issues today at Brown University I am told. There are issues today about the disciplinary system and trust and stuff like that. I said I had a discussion of that issue. There is a limit as to what we at Brown can do to change the lack of trust that some aspects of the African American population, some components of the African American population have are persons in positions of authority. What happens between the police department and the citizenry in Cincinnati, Ohio, has more to do with what the results of what a particular incident at Brown might be or disciplinary proceeding at Brown might be, and we can't do much of anything about what happens in the Rodney King case or in California or what happens in the alleged severe racism of the Cincinnati police department and that was true then also.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to share that you haven't already (roughly)?

A: You know who might be a good name for you? Eric Wiedmer (spelling?). Is that a name you know? Eric Wiedmer was the dean of students at Brown University. Eric Wiedmer is now the head master or something at the Deerfield Academy. And I know Wiedmer and you can use me as a reference. I know he was the dean of students when there was the building seizure involving the John Hay library.