

RICHARD NIXON FOUNDATION

PROJECT: ORAL HISTORY ROBERT J. BROWN PART 1 OF 2

DATE: THURSDAY MARCH 14, 2019

INTERVIEWERS: FRANK GANNON, JONATHAN MOVROYDIS

TRANSCRIPT:

Jonathan Movrodis: This is a Nixon Foundation oral history with Robert J. Brown, former Special Assistant to President Nixon. Thank you for joining us.

Robert J. Brown: Thank you.

Jonathan Movroydis: In the 1960s, where were you politically and what was your involvement in the civil rights movement?

Robert J. Brown: Well, Martin Luther King Junior, who I met in the early '60s in Atlanta, and I met him through Reverend Dr. Wyatt Walker, who was a close friend and who was working for Dr. King. He was his Executive Vice President and Chief of Staff to SCLC and Dr. King. And I met him in a restaurant in Atlanta, and he asked me to come by to the office, which was two blocks up the street, to meet Dr. King, because I had not really met him. I first saw him and met him briefly in New York when I was a federal agent, and I went to hear him speak after the Montgomery bus boycott, and met him briefly then, and I thought he was a very fine individual and he was very impressive. He was a very young man who was doing that.

So, I went to...in Atlanta went to meet him, and we had a long conversation. And he told me how much was going on and what he needed, to all the help he needed, because the help was coming very sparingly then, particularly money. They didn't have money to do a lot of the things that needed to be done and to run the organization. So, he needed my help in that way.

So, initially, I raised a great deal of money for SCLC, and working very closely with Reverend Walker and I sponsored a lot of different meetings and they would hold retreats and pay for them, and did a lot of things.

Jonathan Movroydis: Essentially, what was their mission and what were you seeing to accomplish on the civil rights front?

Robert J. Brown: Well, of course, I came from North Carolina, and I grew up there, and everything was very difficult during the time that I was growing up during the '40s, '50s, and '60s. And I couldn't even go in a restaurant to get a hotdog. Most times I couldn't even go in a restaurant. We couldn't even go to some gas stations and buy gas if you were black. And you couldn't go get a drink of water many times if you were black in North Carolina. And so I had some deep-seated feelings about what Dr. King was doing and what needed to be done in our country. And so I willingly reached out to help him and he became one of my closest friends.

Jonathan Movroydis: Did you have at all any insight on Dr. King's relationship with President Nixon? Back in 1957, Nixon had, when he was vice president, spearheaded the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and Dr. King thanked him for his work on that, helping to get it spearheaded through the Senate. Do you have any insight on the relationship early on between Dr. King and Vice President Nixon?

Bob: Well, all I knew about it was...Dr. King had mentioned it to me on two or three occasions along with several others. And I believe there was a trip that was facilitated, or helped facilitate, of President Nixon when he was vice president. He went to Africa. He was the first president or vice president to ever go to Africa from the United States, and he took a delegation of people over there. And I think Jackie Robinson and a number of others were with him. They were close friends and he worked very closely with him. Because Ghana was the first of the nations to get their freedom in Africa, and President Nixon was the first top executive from the United States to go to Africa on official capacity.

Jonathan Movroydis: You had worked for or were associated with Robert F. Kennedy and John F. Kennedy. Could you tell us a little bit about your work with the Kennedy's?

Robert J. Brown: Well, after I retired or quit my job as a federal agent in New York, I knew a lot of people who were working with the Democratic

Party, and they wanted me to work with them, and Jack Kennedy was running for president, and they made me Director of Information and Research for the Young Democrats in New York. And I met a lot of Democrats during that time, top Democrats. In fact, on one occasion, Harry Truman was coming to town to campaign for Jack Kennedy, and they sent me in a limousine to the airport to pick up Harry Truman, and we had a very interesting conversation from the airport, from LaGuardia Airport where he flew into, downtown to the hotel.

And then afterwards, and I saw him a number of times after then, and he was always an extraordinary man, and well, there were other things I did for them during that campaign.

Well. I first met Robert Kennedy when I was working as a federal agent, and he was the Chief Council for the Senate Rackets Committee under Senator John McClellan. That's where I first met him. And he came to New York to see how cases were made on organized crime, and I was in the middle of that and he was on surveillance of me, making a case one evening for several hours, and that's how I got to know him.

Jonathan Movroydis: Did you support him in 1968?

Robert J. Brown: I did, I did support him, and I had reconnected with him at Dr. King's funeral. When Dr. King was killed, he and his wife...in fact, I had a suite at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, the biggest suite that they had there, and I had a lot of people in my suite, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and just a whole host of people. And Robert Kennedy and Ethel Kennedy came, and he remembered me and I remembered him, and he asked me that would I do some work for him, and I told him I would, and that... Then we went from there.

And so I did a lot of things for him during that period, and then two or three months later, he's killed in California. And I was supposed to be with him then, but I sent one of the team mates I had, Reverend W. E. Banks, who was the NAACP leader from North Carolina and my close friend who worked with me, and I sent him out there to be with him, and he was right there. And he was the one who called me in my hotel in New York, and then it was like two o'clock in the morning, I'm sleeping. And he calls me

and tell me to turn the television on. He doesn't tell me that Robert Kennedy is shot, he was there with him. And he said, "Turn your television on." And so I finally turn the television on. I'm groggy, sleepy, and everything on television is about Senator Kennedy has just been shot and killed at the hotel.

That was a very bad time for me because Dr. King had just been killed, you know, a few months before, and now here Robert Kennedy is killed. And so I'm trying to get it together.

And then a few weeks later I'm in New York and I ran into two people that were close friends of mine, who were working for the Republican Party. One of them was Clarence Towns, who was assistant to Ray Bliss. Ray Bliss was the National Chairman of the Republican Party, and Clarence was working with him. And so he had been trying to reach me, but I had chosen to talk to anybody from any politics after Martin was killed and now Bobby.

But he said, "Would you just sit down and talk to us?" So, we went somewhere and had a little something to eat and then we talked for several hours. And he said, "You don't have to change your registration or anything else, we just need your contact, we need your help." And they had a convincing argument, so I chose to help them work in the Nixon campaign. And one thing led to another and another.

And so one day, I get this call from them saying that they have a problem. Vice President Humphrey had just been in his place in New York and they wouldn't let him out of the airport to demonstrate because of Vietnam War. So, he got back on his plane and left. And then Mr. Nixon was supposed to be at that same place 10 days later. And they were hugely concerned that if Mr. Nixon went to this place and he could not get into town just as Humphrey did, that it would be really a big stink and it might have a profound negative effect on the campaign. So, I told them I'd go there and see what I could do.

Well, I worked it very well, I knew people in that area, some people have a great deal of influence, and the demonstrators and all that. So, I worked out a situation where when Mr. Nixon would come into town, the

demonstrations would all be around at the airport and everything else, but nobody would stop him, nobody would stop his caravan from coming into town.

And so he came on in, with some negative effects on the side, people waving their banners and shouting, but he came in and nobody is trying to block him, and he had a great rally and he had a great fundraiser, and then he went back without anybody trying to stop him the way they did in Humphrey. I mean, they just cold-stopped Humphrey.

And then when he asked Bob Finch, "Who did all this? Who made it possible for me to come into town and Humphrey couldn't get out of the airport?" And that was a big deal because everybody was writing about it and they told him that they had gotten this fellow, Bob Brown, who was working with them to do that, and he worked it out.

And so President Nixon told Bob Finch that he wants this fellow, Bob Brown, to be with him for the rest of this campaign, and that's how I got involved. I traveled on one of the planes and worked with Ziegler and all the rest of the guys, handling the press and handling different kind of sensitive situations in cities. And I raised a great deal of money because the cities that I would go into, I knew a lot of business people there. I'd worked with major companies and CEOs. So I'd just call and tell them, "I'm in town. I'm traveling with the Nixon group and I would like to see if you all would like to be supportive." And about 99% of them supported. They would give me, you know, fairly substantial checks, \$10,000, \$20,000, \$25,000, \$50,000 checks to support the Nixon campaign, which was substantial. And I'm traveling with him and, you know, I'm collecting the checks and I'm handling problems and I work with the press and everything else. So, it was quite a time for me.

Jonathan Movroydis: You had mentioned that Nixon's associates made a convincing argument. You had worked with Democrats, the Kennedy brothers. What convinced you about the Nixon campaign? What convinced you to cross the political divide? Especially since the Democratic Party had such a great reputation in the 1960s on civil rights issues. What convinced you to make that turn? What convinced you about Richard Nixon?

Robert J Brown: Well, I always thought that Richard Nixon was a person that I could be supportive of. You know, when he was vice president, you know, he went to a lot of things, he engaged with black people, and he was the first executive, vice president or president, at that level to go to Africa in official capacity, to go there. He went to Ghana, the president of Ghana, and Ghana was the first nation that was free and had a democracy. And they had elected a president, and Richard Nixon not only went there as vice president, but he took a number of key black people with him like Jackie Robinson and a number of others who supported him at the time.

He didn't seem he was afraid of being around black people, and he would speak to different kinds of issues of fairness and that kind of thing. And I'd always thought he was an extraordinary man, and particularly when he went to Africa, because no other president or vice president had ever been to anything in Africa before Richard Nixon. And so I thought that took a lot of nerve and everything else to do that during that period. So I'd always had strong feelings about what kind of person he was, and that he was a brilliant man. There's no question, everybody admitted that.

And so I didn't have any real problem about working with him. But then I got to know him a little bit and I found him to be a good person, a decent person who had had a background coming from here in California where he lived in very modest circumstances, he worked hard to get to do what he was trying to do, and, you know, I liked him. I liked his ideas about freedom for all and all that. So, I didn't have any problem with that.

And then when I really got to know him, then we hit it off extremely well because he would talk to me about various things, about what we could do as an administration to lift up black people and have people working together, and how we could prevent a lot of strife in our nation, in our military, and all that kind of thing.

And he wanted to get to know a lot of black people better and a lot of black organization heads and that kind of thing. And so early on in the Nixon administration, I brought person after person in to see him. I'm talking about people like Roy Wilkins, who headed up the NAACP for

many years. I'm talking about major black church leaders. I'm talking about all kinds of people, black college presidents who came in to see him and other business people, people he had never met before, and most people who had not been to the White House before. If they've been there, they had been there just in a sort of easy, non-competitive kind of thing, just to show up to have some people of color.

But he wanted a substantive relationship with them. And since I already knew a great number of leadership, and knew what they were about, you know, we brought them into the White House. We have pictures and all kinds of documents showing what we were doing and the discussions that we held in the Oval Office.

Some of the greatest entertainers in the world who were actually heavily involved in the civil rights movement like Sammy Davis, Jr. I brought Sammy into the Oval Office to meet with the president, and Sammy Davis, Jr. was a person who told me from his own mouth, because he became a very close friend, that the Kennedy White House would not allow him to come to the front door. The two times that he went there, he came in, they slipped him in. He didn't come in through the front door. And he was very put out about that.

And so I brought him into the White House to have lunch with me one day, and I ask him, I said, "Would you like to meet President Nixon?" And he said, "Oh, man." He thought that was going to be the greatest thing in the world, to go in the Oval Office to meet the president. Because he had known the Kennedy's, he had raised money for them and everybody else, but they would not allow him to come to the front door of the White House.

So, I took him in. I called Rose Mary Woods and took him in to see the president. And the president was warm, he was gracious, he told Sammy, he said, "Look, I've seen you many times." He said, "My wife and I were at the Copa on several occasions when you and your uncle and your daddy were performing." He said, "I've seen you perform many times." He says, "Sammy, I think you are the greatest entertainer on the face of the Earth." And Sammy was...I mean, he had tears running down his face. He was crying because he could not believe that this he was talking to the

President of United States, and he's telling him he's seen him and he loves him and he loves him as an entertainer and he was a great human being.

And so Sammy asked him, "What do you want me to do? Can I do anything for you, Mr. President? I will do anything." He said, "Well, we'll work with you, Sammy." He said, "I'm sure that Bob is gonna come up, he has some things in mind, and so you all keep in touch and keep me in touch." Well, as a result, we had Sammy involved in a lot of things, we put Sammy on a board, and Sammy also went in to Vietnam and other places to entertain the soldiers and give. Because during that time, we were having some race relations problems in the military in Vietnam and in other crisis places, and Sammy Davis, Jr. went there and he talked about those things. And so there were many things.

We put him on a board and he came to the White House and entertained. In fact, on one occasion when he came to entertain, the president told Sammy that he wanted him to stay in the White House with him. And so Sammy and his wife, Altovise, stayed in the Lincoln Bedroom. And so when Sammy came, and I went over to see him, and they had somebody put him in there and everything, and Sammy wanted me to see the Lincoln Bedroom. And so when I went over there to see Sammy, Altovise is standing there, scouldn't believe it, and Sammy just jumped on the bed and then he just rolled around on the bed, he said, "Can you believe I'm in the Lincoln Bedroom, Bob?" He said, "I don't believe this myself." He said, "From where I came from."

So, he and President Nixon ended up having a great relationship. And Sammy Davis, Jr. was a very, very close friend for many years, and he offered his help and he helped a lot with the soldiers and communities and doing a lot of other things.

Jonathan Movroydis: He was also helpful on the campaign.

Robert J. Brown: Oh, yeah, he was very helpful. And he was severely criticized. I had set up a situation at the Republican National Convention in Florida. We were having a convention and we wanted Sammy to entertain at some point. And so we figured out the best way for Sammy to entertain was to set it up where he would entertain for many of our delegates but for

the youth, and right on the waterfront. And so we set up a couple of nice boats and set up a platform on those boats and everything else, and with dressing rooms and all of that.

And when we invited all the young people, that was going to be their thing, but everybody showed up right there on the waterfront. And Sammy entertained, he brought his band and everything, and it was a great program, right during that convention. It's convention in 1972 in Miami.

And after it was over...Sammy did not know the president was coming. The president had called me and said, "Bob, don't let nobody know, but I'm going to just kind of sneak in there and I wanna be there when Sammy finishes, so I can get up and tell how much we appreciate and love him." I said, "Mr. President, he will really enjoy that."

And so the president was standing back in the corner, and so when Sammy finished entertaining, he came off the stage, and the president walked out, and when he walked out, Sammy just hugged the president, the president hugged Sammy. And it was just an unbelievable moment. But then many in the press and other people made it the ugliest situation, which hurt me, it hurt the president, it hurt Sammy mostly. Because he was just a gregarious, wonderful human being who had been heavily involved in the civil rights movement, who raised millions of dollars for Dr. King and SCLC and NAACP and others to get freedom, total freedom for black people, and then all of a sudden, many of the black leaders just turned on him as if he was a pariah. And it just didn't make any kind of sense.

And he was hurt by that thing for many years. He went to his grave, he never would stop talking about how they turned against him. And he couldn't believe it because he had been a dedicated civil rights warrior. He had raised all the money, participated in marches, he was there with Dr. King, he helped the NAACP. He helped everybody. Sammy was helping everybody and this just happened to him. It was very, very bad situation. And so... But there were many, many things that happened during those years.

Jonathan Movroydis: Can you describe early in the administration, did you talk at all in your first meetings with President Nixon, did you talk at all with him about where the administration wanted to go direction-wise on the issue of civil rights?

Robert J. Brown: Oh, we talked a lot about that, because it was extremely sensitive. In 1968 when Dr. King was killed, there were riots all over America, all over America. There was no major city that was untouched by the riots. I mean, there was burnings, there were killings and all this. So that's the atmosphere that we came in under. It was unbelievable. I mean, I had been out there for a number of years and all this, but it was unbelievable. Go to Washington, D.C., in the 14th Street, in the 7th Street corridors, all these businesses, many of them burned down. And many of them were in the heart of the black community, in the grocery stores. Everything just burned up.

So, what we had to do, we had to get some serious thought and get together some serious action on what we going to do to rebuild the cities, to rebuild these entities within the black community. And that became a large part of my responsibility, working with the major banks and the major companies. Because when we came to the White House, not only were there deficits all over.

For instance, in the automobile business, when we came to the White House in 1969, when the door opened to us, there were only two black-owned dealerships with all of the automobile companies in America. Only two black ownerships existed in 1969. Two.

There were other kinds of inconsistencies all over in terms of businesses. There were no major relationships between the major businesses in America and blacks. Very little. I mean, blacks serving on boards. There were only just a few blacks who served on major corporate boards. There were all kinds of things. The government itself, the United States government was still supporting the building of government buildings with government money, all the people's money, black people, white people, everybody, but many of the buildings that were going up, even the government buildings, blacks were not allowed to work on those buildings. There's iron workers, other masonry contractors. Blacks were not allowed,

blacks couldn't get the contract to work on those buildings. Although that was the people's money.

And so Richard Nixon was a person who wanted to right this wrong. And I put it before him, and he gave me an opportunity and he gave me the strength and the power to do whatever is necessary to fix it. And so what I did under his guidance and with his support, I went to Citibank, I went to the chairman of General Motors, the chairman of Citigroup and other major companies throughout America and told them, "Here's what we want to do, and we want to do it with you. And we know that you can be helpful." And everybody agreed. And we decided that we would set up, with the support of Secretary Stans, Maurice Stans and others, that we would set up an office, a minority business enterprise within the Department of Commerce, and we do it by executive order. And we did that.

And then we started change. We had a minority enterprise board which the chair of it, initially, I think, was Sam Wyly, who was a top multibillion-dollar businessman from Texas. And then we went out and recruited other people like Jim Roche, who was the Chairman and CEO of General Motors, and the chairman of Chase Bank and Citigroup and other big banks and other companies around America. We had everybody participating, because this wasn't going to be just a little shout over in the corner that we were gonna do, and then everybody is gonna leave and go home after Election Day.

And now much of that is still in place. Some presidents didn't give it as much emphasis as we did. In fact, President Obama, who I thought did a good job, some of his people closed up all of the regional office of the Minority Business Enterprise Program that we set up during those years. Many of them didn't give as much emphasis.

And we did it not because somebody was marching on the White House, or somebody that we wanted something from him, we did it because it was the right thing to do and we wanted to help recreate our cities, and particularly in those areas where black people live. And when we came to the White House, we found out that we were building all these government buildings, and blacks most of the time couldn't even work on building

these buildings. So we had to recreate that. You know, through executive orders and other ways, we made sure that blacks could be working in whatever buildings they want. If we were building with government money, with all the people's money, that all the people ought to be able to go work on those jobs. So, it was one of my responsibilities to go make sure that everybody understood that.

And so we set up programs with GSA, who was handling all these buildings and all over, that black people had to work on. And many of the unions at that point, they were the ones who were saying that you have to be a union member. And I didn't have anything to say about whether they were a union member or not, but then some of the unions didn't have any black members. So, if you are going to control the jobs and you don't have any black members, then you can all of a sudden just say that, you know, when things open up, this is not right. How you going to do that? We're all Americans and we're all paying taxes. And this is all of our money. And so all the people ought to be able to participate. And so that's what we did.

We worked with the General Service Administration that builds all these buildings, we made sure that all the people knew that we were going to have some black contractors and we would have some black iron workers and other people on these jobs. If you don't do that, then we going get some people, some contractors who can do that. And we're going to work with the unions, we're going to work with everybody.

And, you know, black colleges. Black colleges in this country had never gotten any real major money. In fact, during the Johnson years, the last years of the Johnson administration, they put together a bill of where the work study money, hundreds of millions of dollars was much of it designated to go to black colleges, but the black colleges couldn't get any because somebody had put a requirement in that bill that there had to be matching funds. So, if you got \$100 million that day, if the black college had \$100 million, they would be in good shape. But they didn't have any matching funds to match so they could get the money.

And so, I had a meeting with everybody in the Indian Treaty Room at the White House, and all the guys who had anything to do with this. And they all told me it couldn't be done, that they had to go back to Congress and

pass a new bill. But yet still, I came up with a way to do it, which still exists even today. And I talked to top people in the White House about it, and I just went on and signed off on it because there's a thing that can happen within the White House, where if you are a senior person, staff member, and you have this little pad in your desk saying, "By order of the President of the United States," and there's certain people authorized to sign it. So I signed it. And all it said was...because they had been telling me that, "You can't do anything about this, Bob, you got to go to the Congress to get the law changed."

Well, one of my guys came to me and he said, "No, you don't have to do that, Mr. Brown." He said, "You can sign that piece of paper in your desk drawer and get that changed." And so I said, "Okay." And so what we did is we wrote up about three or four sentences that read that, "All schools that have a population 50% or more that come from poverty families," and, you know, by the way, we structure poverty, you know, income level and all that, that come from poverty families, "that the matching fund requirement can be waived."

Now, it took in all the black schools, they took in some white schools, the schools that didn't have integrations, colleges, but they took in all the black schools. So, all of a sudden, there was \$100 million on the table that most of the schools thought they would never get because they can never raise that kind of money. And so all of a sudden, \$100 million on the table for the black schools. That's the kind of thing that we did in the Nixon years.

And we just kept pressing, we just kept pressing on every hand. And I would have all these meetings in the Indian Treaty Room, we'd have a lot of top government people, we'd bring them all here. I'd bring them there and I'd tell them, "Here's what we want to do, and I want to know what your ideas are." And they would tell me, government people always tell me why something can't be done. "You can't do this because this person here should do this and you have to go to the Congress and they do that." And the Congress already passed the bill. And so they telling me how it can't be done. And I didn't take that very well and so I pretty much found a way to do what we needed to do, legally and above board. And so that was the way it went during those years.

Jonathan Movroydis: Can you talk a little bit about the impact of those policies, the minority enterprise, the black capitalism policy, and the money for black colleges? Was there significant impact both short term and long term on unemployment and education among African-Americans?

Robert J. Brown: There was an immense, immense turnaround. I see people today all over America, I mean, going into communities and at schools and helping to raise money and speaking and so forth. Because I was a member of the board of trustees of a number of these colleges, and also some major universities. But I see people today who are still talking about that, who are still saying thank you for 50 years ago.

For instance, the Minority Enterprise Program had a big activity in Washington last week, and at the Department of Commerce, and it represented 50 years, they were commemorating 50 years when the president signed off on the Minority Enterprise Program in America. And the auditorium at the Department of Commerce was packed. The secretary came and made a speech and a statement, and other people got up and spoke, and I just couldn't believe it. They gave me an award for having been helpful in creating that office, and I was a little teary about it because I knew how much we had gone through, and how many people we had tried to be helpful to, and how many people we had lifted up and made a playground for them to launch businesses and do everything else that all Americans have an opportunity to do without any reservation and without any discrimination against them.

That's what America is all about, and that's what Richard Nixon was all about. He wanted that kind of America and he was ready to put his energy and his power where other people's mouth had been. People talk about it, go out and make a political speech, I mean, and he never made a whole lot of speeches about any of that. I mean, we talked about it, we meet about it all the time. I'd tell him what we're doing and he gave me the flexibility and the backing to do whatever needed to be done. He never questioned me one time, not once about, "Bob, you ought to slow this down a little bit. We got too much of this stuff going on." He never, never did that.

In fact, he encouraged me that when things would appear in the newspapers somewhere and somebody would send him something, or Rose Mary Woods would give him something to show him, he would tell Rose Mary, "Get Bob over here, I want to talk to him about this." And then he would be talking to me about it. Because I would give him reports from time to time, and so he would know what's going on, but I mean, the President of United States has 1,000 boards coming in every day. So, I didn't take advantage of him in that manner, but he gave me the flexibility and the authority to move it on, and that's what I did. No holds barred. You know?

And I was able to attend all the cabinet meetings, he gave me that flexibility, and to do whatever else was necessary. If I saw a problem that exists in the military, or in any other department or agency within our government or in our country, I had the power to deal with it and I did. And I think one of the things that we did that was so important, that came to a greater reality in two or three weeks ago when I was in Washington than I've ever had before, I went to a meeting that was organized by David Stewart, who has a large company, multibillion-dollar company. He lives in St. Louis.

But he started off in the Minority Enterprise Program. And now his company does billions of dollars' worth business all over the place. He's a member of the board of directors of some of the biggest companies in the world...he started off in the Minority Enterprise Program. He is the biggest businessman in the country, black businessman now.

And so I was talking to some of them the other day and several business guys, and they were reminding me of what went on then as opposed what seemed like a lot of lack of coordination and movement now to do and open up those gates for everybody in this country. And that's what America is all about. That's where we are, that's who we are, and that's where we have to go. And we have to let everybody know that. And President Nixon, there were no holds barred.

I have pictures in my office, and I think here at the Nixon Library, where there were numerous meetings held with black people from every walk of

life, black ministers, heads of black churches, the black fraternities and other things. I saw something on television the other night, on national television, where they were talking about sickle cell anemia, about the initiative that NIH, the National Institute of Health, had done in the last couple of years. Well, when we went to the White House, we found out that there was only a little bit of money being spent. I'm talking about probably less than \$100,000 on sickle cell anemia from the United States government.

And I went to Howard University when they told me about it, to see what was happening because that was the only major initiative in the United States of America on sickle cell anemia in 1969. And then the doctor who was handling it, he was an elderly guy who had been out there for years on a shoestring, and where they were doing the research and everything was not quite as large as this room that we're in. And they were getting money from wherever they could get it to, and the United States government would not give him any sufficient money to do research on sickle cell anemia in 1969.

But I went up there and I saw what was going on, and I told the doctor, all of doctors and several others who were working on this, who had been working on it for years, that we were gonna get some help. I called Bob Finch, who was the secretary of HEW at the time, and I told him what was happening, and he said, "Well, we'll do whatever we need to do, Bob." I said, "That's what we want to do." And I said, "I want you to send some people from the agency within the department who does that up there to see these doctors tomorrow and get this thing going."

And so we started, we got money in there, we enlarged the offices and everything else on sickle cell anemia. This was the first time that there was any major work done on sickle cell anemia. It was done under President Nixon and at his direction. And so there were many things over and over again that we did over and over again.

The military. The military, you had two black flag officers in the whole of the military, you know, like generals or admins. And, you know, I talked to Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman about it one day, and they said, "Well, we're on our way in to see the president, we'll take it up with him."

And then he'll probably call you to see what he wants to do." So they took it up with him, and an hour-and-a-half later, Bob Haldeman calls me and he says, "Bob, we took that matter up with the president about black flag officers, and the president had an idea. And I want to pass that idea on to you because we thought it was a good idea." He said, "The president said, in the future, that you should have the Military Aides Office, that when the papers come over for him to sign off on who is going to be a general or admin or a flag officer in the military, that those papers will come to your office and you will review those papers to see if there are any women or blacks on that list."

So, every time, after that, they would send the papers over to me. When it came in to the White House, they used to come to my office. I'd review them very carefully and double-check, triple-check to see if there were any women or blacks on there. And there were none for several months. So, we just send it back unsigned.

I'd call Haldeman and Ehrlichman and tell them what I'd found, and he said, "Well, just send it to president. I want you to send it back, Bob, till they get the message." So I kept sending it back to the Pentagon until they got the message. Until one day, about five or six months later, I looked at a list they sent over, and then there were several blacks, there were two or three women, and I said, "They getting educated." And sometimes it takes that. But this was done under Richard Nixon's direction, but nobody can even believe that today.

I went to a meeting in Washington a few weeks ago, and that David Stewart had put together. He still works with the military on a lot of different things. And it was at the Wardman, one of the biggest hotel ballrooms in D.C. And the ballroom is packed. I think they had several of the top people from the Trump administration, his secretary and this, that, and the other. But all over the room, there were blacks all over the room who were admirals or generals or something else. I mean, it had tears flowing down my eyes when I saw that. It hadn't come to me, I hadn't thought about it too much. But there were tears running down my eyes, because, I mean, it brought all those years back that we were pushing for just that kind of thing to happen, that the military would look like America. And at that meeting, I found that.

And then while I'm standing there wiping my eyes, a little lady, black woman, not too tall, kind of short, walks up to me and she has three stars on her shoulder. Three stars. Not one star, but three stars. That means she was what, lieutenant general? A little black woman. And she gave me her card. She said, "Mr. Brown, I know who you are," and she said, "A lot of us know what you did and what President Nixon did to make this happen." She said, "I just want to thank you." And she said, "I'd like to get with you sometime just to have a discussion. And whenever you're available, if you call me, I'd like to get with you." I said, "I'd be delighted to sit and talk to you." It was just unbelievable.

But that's what I've run into over and over across America, with the colleges, with black business people, and who have a chance, that something, the doors will open for them, and not only with the government, but with the private sector. And those cities that were burned out during after Martin Luther King was killed in 1968, it was our responsibility to go back in and regroup. In many of those cities, I went to the different chain stores, headquarters in New York and elsewhere, to get them to get joint venture situations and building those buildings back, where would be blacks in those communities who could set up different kind of ways that they could help not only build and work there but have some ownership in the buildings they go to there. And that kind of thing is done all the time.

But up until that time, you had no big-time effort for blacks and other minorities to be involved in the ownership of the buildings. Somebody else owned the buildings in the black community and they weren't black.

Frank Gannon: In your book, I'm putting words in your mouth, but sometimes you're almost thought like a super hero when you get off the plane, a government plane, and the president had empowered you essentially to go up and get a plane and to go somewhere and solve a problem, can you talk about some of those experiences?

Bob: Well, I used to work very closely with different agencies who dealt with disasters, and there were many problems from time to time, many problems. And you know, in Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia where

they would have these tornadoes and floods and all this kind of thing. And I would get different kind of calls from Roy Wilkins, from Martin Luther King, Sr. and other people around the country, civil rights leaders, that blacks were not getting the same kind of treatment.

For instance, I got a call one day after a big storm in Mississippi, where a whole black area had been wiped out, and some of the whites had damage and had been wiped out, too. And so after three or four days, when there was no aid given to the black people, Roy Wilkins got a lot of calls from Mississippi, and he called me and he said, "Bob, we're having a lot of complaints on this storm down here. The black people wiped out." And he said, "They're bringing hundreds of mobile homes in there, and other aid, and all the aid is being given to white people and none to the black people." And I couldn't believe it, and I told Roy, I said, "You know, this is very difficult for me to believe. I don't think that anybody would be that stupid knowing what we've done already and how we're handling this kind of thing."

So I called our disaster people and I told them, I said, "You know, I'm going to Mississippi tomorrow, and I'm flying in there." And I said, "I understand that there are no black people getting the kind of aid in terms of housing and everything else that the whites are being given. And so I want you all to know I'm going down there, and there better be some mobile homes and everything else in there. When I get off that plane, I want to see them." And so they said, "Oh, Mr. Brown, we have everything." I said, "We don't know anything about that, but we'll get down there."

So, the next day, I went out there and got on a plane and I took two or three top government officials who were dealing with that. And so we flew down there and we landed, and when we landed, the governor had his executive assistant, his top man down there to meet me. As we are taxiing up off the runway going toward the little terminal, I'm looking at the window, and I see the Mississippi guys, the black people that I knew, like Aaron Henry, who was the head of the NAACP down there and a warrior. I saw all of these people standing over here, and they were roped off. They had a rope around these people. They were standing, then the governor's

people and the mayor and everybody else was over in another area. They weren't roped off with all the black people over there behind the rope.

So, I told one of the guys who was with me, who was working for me, I said, "You see that?" I said, "Now, when this plane stops, I want you to get off the plane and go tell the governor's executive assistant who I see out there and the mayors who are out there, that if they don't move those damn ropes away from there, then I'm going to take everything out of this area. Everything." I said, "I'm gonna stop everything that's happening down here." And I said, "Because everybody is going to be together, anything we're doing in this administration."

And so as soon as the plane stopped and they open the door for him, he jumps off and he runs out there and he tells the governor's men that I'm not getting off the plane or anything until they get those ropes. And I saw them start, they just cut the rope, they just cut the rope. So everybody started getting together. And as soon as they rolling over there and everybody is together, I get off the plane. And the governor's men out there shake my hand and NAACP, Aaron Henry is there, and I hug him because I knew him. He had been to jail probably 50 times over the years and he had dedicated his life to freedom for everybody.

And so we had a very successful meeting. But they had to know where we were coming from. We're the Nixon administration, this is what we represent. We're responsible, we want to make sure that everybody gets the housing, gets the aid and everything else. Not just for a group of white people over here, but everybody. I wanted everybody to get aid. And on that occasion the word gets around.

So, after that when we would have big disasters and I'd fly in or something, there was never a problem with what the aid situation was going to be, because they knew what it was going to be. You know, if I had anything to do with it, then I had a whole lot to do with it.

Frank Gannon: Could you describe your office? You had one of the largest of the offices of special assistants, so there are only a dozen maybe special assistants to the president, you have one of the largest offices of

three or four people. Can you describe your office, how you set it up, how you chose the people who work for you and how your office operated?

Robert J. Brown: Well, I had a suite of offices in my office. The president, early on, the president decided that he wanted his working office to be in the Executive Office Building in the White House. And so he chose the office right across the hall from my office. And, of course, when that happened, you know, that there was a lot of office situations kind of changing.

So, one of my guys who was working for Haldeman, Larry, who is a close friend, and Larry is the young guy who was handling all of that kind of the administrative stuff for the White House and Haldeman. He came to office with pad, and he said, "Bob," he said, "We changing up everything here now, we got to regroup, you know, this outfit and this office across from you here for the president and this and that and the other." And I looked up and I said, "Larry," and we laugh about this all the time. I said, "Larry, when I move out of this suite of offices, I'm moving out, period. I'm out of here, man. You know, I don't have to be here. That's it, I'm out of here."

And so he folded up his pad, he was just writing. Larry was always busy, he was busy doing a lot of things. He folded up his pad and he said, "Well, let me get out of here. I'll tell Bob Haldeman." I never heard from Larry or Bob Haldeman about it anymore, that kind of change. Because I had a big suite of offices there, I had three assistants and I had three secretaries. And nobody else had that kind of setup in there. Maybe Haldeman, He didn't have many people. At the White House you don't set up a big situation where you have 5 or 10 people working for you, nothing like that. You know, why you're there, you're able to do a great amount of work, and a lot of it you have to do on your own because it's very sensitive. So, you have to keep moving and you can't have a lot of people waiting in line to see you about anything. You have to keep moving all the time, day and night.

##