

Interviewee: Thomas, A.I.**Interview: May 14, 2007**

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

Interview with: Dr. A.I. Thomas**Interviewed by: Isaac Hampton II****Date: May 14, 2007****Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola****Topic: ROTC Program, Prairie View University, HBCUs**

IH: Today is May 14, 2007. I am here in Houston, Texas at the Prairie View A&M Nursing School with Dr. A.I. Thomas. Dr. Thomas, starting out, can you tell me [large part of recording missing here]

AIT: (Inaudible) _____ junior high and graduated from one of the historic schools that was established by a philanthropist by the name of McDonald. (Inaudible) _____ and stayed out of school for a while working and then entered (inaudible) _____ and spent approximately 2 years at the University when I was drafted into the Army, World War II in September of 1943. I had an interesting tour. I had training (inaudible) _____ with technical training at Fort Riley in Kansas and we were shipped overseas to Lehare, France. Spent some time in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. My priority ranking in those days was controlled by the draft and we had men who were in their 30s and early 40s with 5 and 6 children, so my priority ranking being 27 years old, no children, was pretty low. So, at the end of World War II in Germany, or VE Day, I was shipped over to the Philippine Islands. We left from Marseilles, France and spent some 67 days on the sea going through the Straits of Gibraltar over to the Philippine Islands where I spent approximately 3 to 4 months on the Philippine Islands and they were

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preparing for an invasion of Okinawa. So, they put us on what was called landing ships and we took off to go to Okinawa but the atomic bomb was dropped and we were diverted to Korea.

So, we landed at Pousson, Korea, right on the tip of the peninsula and I stayed in Korea for approximately 6 to 8 months and by that time, my priority ranking to be discharged had come up and they shipped me to San Francisco where I was discharged from San Francisco, but it was quite an interesting experience for a young man.

IH: Were you an officer?

AIT: I was a non-commissioned officer.

IH: What was that like, serving in a segregated army like that?

AIT: Well, you knew, we grew up with this segregation in the South so if there is any normality to anything, it is almost like you are living with a broken arm or living being blind or living being deaf. The impediment or handicap is there but there is a degree of normalcy to it. So, we made the best of what we had. It was not a time to be angry, it was a time to take advantage of the opportunity we had to serve the country and to grow and (inaudible). And, of course, the big thing that came out of it was the benefit under the GI Bill, the educational benefits. I suppose that was a stroke of genius for Congress to have passed that piece of legislation because it allowed all of those young men and older men, too, for that matter, to be subsidized to go to further

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education and it took me through . . . I already had 2 years as I said at (inaudible)_____ and when I decided to go back to school, I decided to leave the South and I went to school in Kansas, so I got my bachelors and masters degrees from Kansas State, and then I got married and could fully take advantage of my GI Bill. I went to Pennsylvania State University and then I transferred over to Ohio State where I completed my doctorate degree in the administration of _(inaudible)_____.

IH: (inaudible)_____.

AIT: I had a wonderful educational experience after I got out of the Army. Fortunately, I was able to encounter tremendous intellectual professors _ (inaudible)_____. They took a great deal of interest in me, I took a great deal of interest in them, and it really probably was the happiest part of my life, going through that educational experience. It was just tremendous.

IH: What year did you complete your doctorates?

AIT: This is my 50th year. I completed my doctorate in 1957. So, I got a call the other day from the president of Ohio State reminding me, "You graduated now 50 years (inaudible)_____ down in Houston in September to talk to you all." So, I suppose they want some support, money.

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IH: Of course. Well, as big as that school is, it is hard to believe they actually need money. That is amazing. As far as when you were growing up, do you have any recollection of your grandparents and maybe some of the things they told you about growing up as a man of color, some of the challenges you would face?

AIT: What was interesting . . . New Orleans was an interesting place. We had segregation but you did not have the hard-nosed racial segregation that you would have in the northern part of Louisiana or in some sections of Mississippi or Arkansas. The neighborhoods were integrated; while the schools were segregated, the children played together until the almost got to a certain age and then, I guess the parents told them at that point there should be a segregation of their lives. But the families were integrated, they talked with one another, they lived with one another, they shared with one another, but as far as my parents or grandparents, we were basically poor without knowing we were poor. We did not have such names as poverty in those days. We had limited resources and you used those limited resources wisely. The parents, particularly my parents, encouraged us to get an education, encouraged us to do well. My mother's father was from France so I did not ever get to know him because he had passed. My grandmother on my mother's side was a frequent visitor and she lived in a place called Fort St. Leon in New Orleans, not too far from Gretna (sp?). (Inaudible). My father's parents came out of Louisiana. They were truck farmers. They were entrepreneurs. They grew vegetables. Each summer when we were out of school, we were shipped up to the farm and lived on the farm, the vegetable farm, truck farming, and planted vegetables. We would take them to the market in New Orleans.

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They were _(inaudible)_____ families in those days. Any event, all the relatives would pack up into the trucks and would come into New Orleans for whatever we were celebrating - a wedding, a death, a (inaudible)_____ ceremony. It was a close family tie. That had only been broken since World War II. _(Inaudible)_____ the transportation and those types of changes in the nation and society. But we did not recognize, as I said, that we were poor. We had an abundance of the things we needed. We did not have anything that could be classified as wasteful, as I see today, even with my own children and other children. (Inaudible)_____ whether it is toys or books, whatever we had, we had it on a rather (inaudible)_____ basis. ___ (inaudible)_____ and then when it wore out, we handed it down to someone else, whether it was a book or clothes or whatever, a picture, whatever it was. But it was a very happy life and I feel very grateful to my family, both my mother and my father.

Neither one finished elementary school but were very, very supportive. I can remember my father with his inability write. He would take the newspaper when he came back from work and he would just write his name on the newspaper, and it was kind of disturbing because he would cover the newspaper with his signatures. And back in those days, in school, you had a course called penmanship. He would take that penmanship book and just write, write and write, and ended up with the most perfect, legible handwriting of anybody you could think of. With my education, I still cannot write as well as he could write, I mean by way of forming his alphabets and forming the _____. So, it just shows you the persistence that he had and the persistence that he imported to us, both my mother and father.

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IH: O.K., so that was a huge influence on you?

AIT: That is correct.

IH: Fast forward to, say, 1957, after you have your doctorates. I guess first, I mean this was kind of the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement - what was it like to be a young, educated black man then in the late 1950s?

AIT: I would have to go back even further than that. My professional career began sort of in 1949. I had received. . . let me back up just a minute . . . I went to Kansas under interesting circumstances. I had a coach at Xavier, played football for a coach at Xavier, by the name of Wright. He had lived in Baker, Kansas, and I was struggling trying to decide where I wanted to go to school and had picked out 3 schools: one in Kansas, one in Illinois, Bradley, Illinois, and another Oswego, New York. And he said, "Well, why are you anguishing about this? Why don't you just get on the train and go visit the places?" So, certainly, I took him up on that. Kansas was the closest place to start with, and that was in 1946 after I got out of the Army. I got to Kansas and interviewed with the head of the department. He was interested in me, I was interested in him. He was in Germany. He had a very bitter attitude as to what had happened in Germany in terms of World War II. He interviewed me and he said, "I would like to have you come and stay with us." Well, this was Kansas, now, mind you. I was driven that way because I was interested in architecture and I had gone to the employment service in New Orleans and

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the man was quite frank. He said, "If you are interested in architecture, you might want to leave this city because there is no opportunity for you in architecture in New Orleans."

So, when I got to Kansas, this man by the name of Otto Hankhamer took a real liking to me. He said, "Come on back in September and we will get you started." Well, the interesting thing, coming from New Orleans to Kansas, when I got to Kansas, I found that I could not be admitted. And I could not understand that. But it turns out that Kansas had a quota on African Americans. They were only accepting a certain number. And it put a lot of embarrassment on Dr. Hankhamer, one, because he had made a commitment to me that I could enroll and apparently he somehow or another bypassed the admissions office, and then, the other thing - it struck him that here we went to war fighting intolerance and I have got intolerance on my own campus. And I could see him today walking across the campus meeting with the admission people until he finally got them to admit me. He said, "I made a commitment to this person, the person is here now, and I am just not going to stand for this. And then, when I got there, I found out that the campus there was rather segregated. When they had dances, the black students would dance in the cafeteria, they would pipe music over to them so they could dance to it and the whites would do dancing in the gymnasium. It was just like in (inaudible) _____. The black students would eat together and the white students would eat together. But that did not in any way affect, and even back in those days in 1946, I remember taking a psychology course from a professor - I do not recall his name - and he taught the distinction of races, the whites, Caucasians, were superior; the Asians were next in superior; blacks were next in superior. It was interesting because the students, the black students, argued with him about those things. I made up my mind I was not

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going to argue with them. I could not win the argument anyway. So, if he wanted them to be first, second and third, I told him they were first, second and third and went on about my business. He was not going to change.

The only thing that struck me in that Kansas situation - I went to church and I thought Kansas was different from where I had come from in the South, and I knelt in a pew next to a white gentleman, I guess it was a gentleman, and all of a sudden, I saw him climb over the back of the pew, getting away from me. And I said, this could not be Kansas and this could not be a church! But it was. But, for me, that was not cause for resentment or bitterness. It was cause for understanding how much work we had to do in terms of resolving this whole racial situation in this country. I tried to (inaudible) those things.

I remember when I applied for student employment at Kansas. I never will forget this professor (inaudible) about 8 or 9 students and he had a storage shop with machinery. I do not know - that machinery had just been thrown in there and never cleaned or anything. And when he made the assignments, he gave me the worst assignment and, of course, he did not understand that that was really my forte. I liked working with machinery and I liked rebuilding machinery. And I went in there, cleaned up that machinery, that which could run, I made run, that which could not run, I identified it, that which could be made (inaudible) and months later, he came back to see this. And it was interesting, he said, "O.K., I am going to promote you to the top." Well, had I taken the attitude of being bitter, I would have been lost in my bitterness, you see? I did not take . . . I took it as a challenge. I did not interpret it as . . . I knew it was discrimination because I knew exactly what he had done. He was going to

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try to get rid of me by giving me worse assignments, the dirtiest jobs, and saying, O.K., I will let (inaudible)_____ myself. I will not have the penalty on my conscience that I _____, I will say he just could not cut it. But here again, it is a lesson that I learned and never forgot, that sometimes your worse challenge is your best opportunity.

The other thing that I learned there in the classroom . . . one professor (inaudible)_____ descriptive geometry and he had a reputation that nobody made an A in descriptive geometry. No one. White, black or whatever. So, I took the course and I would ask him a question. He would say, "It is in your book. Look it up in your book." He would visit and socialize with the white students in the class. He would answer that question. But when I asked a question, it was always, "Look it up in your book." I took his advice and looked it up in the book. Well, the final examination. In that particular course, you could prove your answers - you could draw whatever it is you are drawing and you could cut it out and see if it went into three-dimension form from the two-dimensional paper. I had gotten so far, I was proving my drawings because I was that far ahead. And he came to me and said, "You enjoy what you are doing, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, I like it." He said, "Keep moving." I was the only one that made an A in descriptive geometry.

IH: Wow that is excellent!

AIT: Another experience in race . . . I had an undergraduate major in mathematics and an undergraduate major in physics. And I never will forget the professor in mathematics. I had gone through most of my lower courses and was taking calculus from him. And

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one day, he said, "You know, you are the first black person I have ever taught who could do mathematics." I said, "Well, you have not taught any black people then because there are black people that can run rings around me in mathematics." I said, "I am no mathematician. I enjoy what I am doing but I am no mathematician." He said, "Well, you are the first one I have ever taught that could do mathematics." And as a result of that, I was entered into the mathematics honor society. Now, keep in mind, back to your question, all of these experiences that I am relating to you had this racial tinge to it, had this racial connotation to it, you know? If he is given something tough, he is going to falter. If you put him on his own, he is going to quit. If he learns something difficult, it must be an exception. None of that is true but if you do not understand that and take each one of these incidences and get tied up in the racial conflict, you are going to get lost in the person. The person that is putting this on you is not going to get lost. You are going to get lost. And they are going to go on with their lives but you are going to go on with your life contaminated by hate, getting off track, you know, and just the reverse of this, I had a very difficult professor who was (inaudible)_____. I mean, in general, he was hated by white people, hated, because he assumed a sort of German persona of looking down on people. My white counterparts in my class would say to me, "How do you get along with Dr. So and So?" I would say, "I am doing really well." And they said, "Well, we don't like him and I think the reason why you get along with him - he likes you." I said, "Well, how can you as a white person talk about him liking me and not liking you?" But here was a reverse of that same phenomena where, on one hand, it was a challenge because you were black and on the other hand, where this guy, for some reason, took a liking to me and other students of the white race felt I was getting unequal treatment

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from this guy. This is an interesting thing but it was a wonderful journey, a wonderful journey, and one that obviously I will never forget, I have enjoyed and (inaudible)_____.

IH: Excellent. If we fast forward to Prairie View in the 1960s, can you tell me how you wound up at Prairie View?

AIT: Well, the head of the department at Prairie View (inaudible)_____ recruiting teachers and the same doctor Hankhamer, the German I was telling you about in Kansas, told me about this opportunity at Prairie View, so I went to Prairie View and apparently they felt that I had some things they liked and I liked what they were doing. Now, we are going to come back to this military situation that you are interested in, in a minute because my dissertation was on the historically black colleges and I went to Prairie View as one of the early historically black colleges. So, the introduction of that situation at Prairie View tied in with my study of historically black colleges. The same thing happened at Prairie View. I went into a situation where there were historically black people who were entrenched with historical ideas and gave me, again, another opportunity because I brought to the university, Prairie A&M University, some new ideas, both in terms of programs, in terms of students, in terms of concepts. It just was a good match. It was just a challenge. (Inaudible)_____ my experience in Kansas, I always said was a very happy experience. When I got to Prairie View, it was a very happy experience. Now, going into the military, what are you interested in?

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IH: What year did you arrive at Prairie View?

AIT: 1949. Prairie View, as the other historic black colleges, particularly land grant colleges, came out of the Moral Act of 1862, and that was right at the turn of the industrial revolution when Lincoln created these what is called land grant colleges. Up to that point, higher education was heavily liberal arts, engineering (inaudible)_____ and Lincoln felt that . . . well, poor people did not go to college, white or black. So, he felt there should be at least one university or college in every state that should allow what under the Moral Act is called the poor man's college, and they were basically agriculture. and that is why they called them agriculture and mechanical. And the whites or blacks. Incidentally, the land grants were basically a form of funding. It was not that they gave them land; they gave them resources from the land. So, they would give them X number of acreage that they could either put the university on or they could sell it (inaudible)_____ university. Incidentally, in the mix of this, the land grant college in Mississippi was Alcorn _____ white college. In Texas, it was Texas A&M, white college. But they tied up the money in Mississippi such that Alcorn never got off the ground because they could not get the money freed. While Prairie View and Texas A&M are technically founded on the same date, 1876, through the Moral Act, Prairie View did not get started until 1878. That is when the first set of students enrolled at the university. Now, if you were called . . . this was right at the point of the end of the Civil War and the Congressional Moral Act mandated that each one of these universities would have a military science component, then have it ROTC. Every one of them. Now, there are several levels of this. Basically, 3 levels. West Point is strictly a military academy, preparing young officers for the Army. The next level of officer training is what we just

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observed every day at Virginia Tech. They are not quite at West Point but they come under a classification where they basically are training officers under a special mandate very similar to West Point. I think maybe there are only 2 or 3 of those left. Texas A&M is one, Virginia Tech, VMI. Maybe 3 or 4 of them. And then, the rest of them are basically Reserves, officer training (inaudible)_____ which Prairie View has. Prairie View did not come on line in 1878 when the first students were enrolled. It was not until about 1918 that Prairie View had its first ROTC unit because in the early days of Prairie View, they were basically a 2 year university. But they did come on line with the ROTC. Now, the object of that ROTC was what I am going to say a national defense component of education. It was to be sure that we had, for the nation, a basic officer training military unit that was available for war and that is how they were turning out these commissioned officers to give the nation that source of military manpower.

IH: O.K. That is fine.

AIT: Prairie View had its ROTC installed and basically, they were training not commissioned officers but basically training military folks to go in World War I because (inaudible)_____. They then emerged when they brought their degrees on line that the degree would underwrite or under_(inaudible)_____ the Commission. Now, someone would ask the question: Why would Prairie View maybe subscribe to this or why would the black colleges subscribe to this? To me, there are many justifications and this is sort of philosophical . . . is that the defense of this country is supported by its military. We constitute 6% of the world population and it is inherently necessary, in my

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judgment, that a part of this 6% should be represented by an equivalent part of African Americans -- whether it is in medicine, engineering, science, you name it, but also in (inaudible) _____. One of the most tragic things that I think happened was that you had a military going to war and you did not have African American officers sitting at the table directing part of this. And this was demonstrated when we first went into Iraq with President George H. Bush, the father Bush. When General Waller, who was a Prairie View graduate told them, "We are not ready to do this. We do not have the manpower, we do not have the machinery," [tape sounds like it is overlapping at this point] [end of side 1]

. . . In my limited knowledge of the Navy, I had gotten pretty well familiar with the Army and I just strike one thing about it. There was a (inaudible)_____ about the Vietnamese period (inaudible)_____ a white college campus and there was a break because all the universities had mandatory ROTCs. The compromise was lets not continue to mandate (inaudible) _____ college campus, lets just add the advanced corps on the campus. So many campuses eliminated their mandatory and just had the second two years. We continued our mandatory because we felt that it was an entrance for these young people to get a disciplined life, to understand what study was about, and we continued our mandatory. But I never will forget the general who was our commanding officer for the region that we were in for ROTC, came to Prairie View to (inaudible)_____ as a part of this change from (inaudible)_____. And, of course, we liked ceremony, I suppose, and we tried it out _____. We had the band (inaudible)_____, we had the advantage and (inaudible)_____. And I never will

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forget General _____ said, "Dr. Thomas, I came here to insist that you all not continue what you are doing." He said, "But after seeing what you are doing here today, I am not going to insist on anything. You continue doing what you are doing because what you are doing is what we need." And he did not invoke what other people were doing. He said, "You are doing what you need for your students and your school and for the Army and I am going to support you." And he went back to Fort Riley and we continued our program until I stepped down.

IH: Did you ever hear from LBJ or Robert Kennedy, or McNamara? Did you ever have any conversations with them?

AIT: Obviously, our relationship with LBJ was interesting because LBJ was . . . Lyndon Johnson was an educator in Texas and he put . . . NYA . . . one of the buildings on the Prairie View campus. And he was active in promoting job training. Of course, Barbara Jordan was _(inaudible)_____ and maintained a great understanding of what we were trying to do in support of it. So that was (inaudible)_____. So, let's come back to Gerald Thomas sitting out in my office and me asking him, "Why would you want to come to Prairie View?" He said, "_(inaudible)_____. We can find all the water we want." He said, "What we are interested in is mathematicians, engineers, scientists, and (inaudible) _____ people and we see that at Prairie View, you have one of the strongest curricula in those areas in the historic black colleges and that is why we want to put it in because you have the academic strength. (Inaudible)_____, you just give us a good foundation." It was out of that particular experience that we put the

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proposition before the school. "Would you like to have a little ROTC at Prairie View?" And they said yes. We started the Naval ROTC unit and our first classes of naval officers were commissioned and we had 13 young men in that class: 2 Hispanics and 11 African Americans. And we were proud of that unit, and I hope that you will pick up on what I am about to say because I think it represents an opportunity. Out of those 13 young men that went on in the Navy, three of them became admirals and 10 of them became captains, and I am hoping that one day . . . as a matter of fact, one of the young men, the most recent one to retire was a vice-admiral, three star admiral, and he recently took over the superintendents in the Los Angeles public school district, Admiral Davis Brook. He came out of Florida, came to Prairie View, went in the Navy. I am hoping that we can get some historian like you to write the history of those 13 first graduates. I think it would make an excellent book, an excellent publication for somebody. So, if you get nothing else out this interview, you have got a request that you write the history. If you want to be a military historian, then you write the history. Someone has written the history of the first black naval officers.

IH: (Inaudible)_____.

AIT: Now, we need to get someone to write the history of these . . . all of them came from the South, all of them came from _(inaudible)_____. During the period of my tenure . . . I do not know where it is. I am trying to get someone to _(inaudible)_____ but we graduated over 270 something naval officers. We graduated more naval officers than all the white schools graduated black officers, African

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American officers in the history of their school. We put that many more into the (inaudible)_____ than all of the white schools together which obviously for me is a great deal of pride and they have gone on, as I said, to attain rank. One of the young men, when he finished his naval career and retired, he went on to commercial oceanography. In other words, he went on to get his commercial pilot's for deep sea vessels in the civilian ranks. So, it did not stop (inaudible)_____. Others went on (inaudible)_____. So, we had a very interesting type of experience for our youngsters in the naval ROTC as well as the Army ROTC.

IH: What was the biggest obstacle in getting this Navy ROTC program started but it sounds obviously you had the blessings of the military.

AIT: No obstacles at all. The Navy wanted it. The Navy wanted that at Prairie View. The Navy put good officers. I guess if there was any obstacle at all, and it is not an obstacle, the Navy and the Army have a tendency to put what I call officers who are going to retire or not going up the ranks anymore and, to me, I can understand why they do that but when you have got an (inaudible)_____ a captain or whoever it is who knows he is not going to go back on active duty and be promoted, he has a tendency to relax a little bit, you see, and we did not need that. We needed top flight officers who would give these guys . . . we knew where those guys were going. They were going against the best competition in the nation, some of the best colleges in the nation, the best universities in the nation. They did not need any strike. They needed to get the best experiences that were there and I had to insist during that period . . . I had to one time

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remove a captain from the naval ROTC because he took that attitude and I told the admiral, I said, "You have got to get him out of here." The admiral said, "Well, I cannot" . . . I said, "Look, Admiral, if you cannot get him out of here, I will call the Secretary and make them get him out of here." He said, "Dr. Thomas, I will be there in the morning." And he came in and he removed this guy. That is not what we needed. We needed to get these young people as sharp as they could because we knew the competition. If you are going against (inaudible) graduates, (inaudible) you cannot be half stepping, saying, "I came from Prairie View." You have to meet the competition. And, of course, this is how they excelled in . . . that first class went on to be captains and admirals because they were good. I had experience with them. They still laugh about the fact that they were about to go on to (inaudible) and I had them over to my house and we had a dinner and right in the middle of this, I stopped. I said, "Did you hear what was going on a few minutes ago?" I said, "Now, go back to what you are doing and I want you all to stir that tea the way you were stirring that tea." So, they stirred the tea and the (inaudible). I said, "When you get in front of an admiral on a ship, I do not want to hear that tea clink. You learn how to stir that tea without making that clink against that class." So, some of them still laugh about that. Little things like that. Another one says (inaudible) some of it is a lie but I will accept it. Some of them said I had a fixation about seeing something with a toothpick in his mouth. You don't walk around with a toothpick in your mouth. That is ridiculous.

IH: Except John Wayne, right?

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AIT: Yes. Especially if you are going to be in the Navy. They said I had this fixation about take that toothpick out of your mouth. But these were little habits that really we watched very closely because we knew they were not leaving Prairie View which was essentially an African American world, they were going into a global world. They are not only going to be meeting with Caucasians, they are going to be meeting with people from Great Britain, from France, and all of those countries. (Inaudible)_____ measure up.

IH: Now, playing off that, from like 1963 to 1973 and then into Vietnam, Civil Rights era, for an African American student to attend an HBCU, Prairie View, what advantages, looking back, do you see, hey, this is what an HBCU can give an African American student that a traditional white college cannot?

AIT: Well, let me put it like this: I am real concerned with _____ right now because I think some of them think that they should be doing what white university colleges should be doing and they are trying to imitate them. I feel that the HBC was for a long, long time in the future as a mission of nourishing African American students and educating non-African American students. They are supposed to serve them. How can you take an African American student, put him in the class with a Chinese English teacher and develop him? That African American student needs the best English teacher there is in terms of diction, in terms of pronunciation, in terms of everything about the English language. It is not a come and get it if you want it - come and get it even if you don't want it because when you get mature enough, you understand why you have to get

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it. So, I think our curriculum should be tailor made to the needs of the student. I listened to something the other day where the current President Bush went to speak to a Catholic school in Pennsylvania and they talked about their traditions, they talked about in terms of the principal of the Benedictine saint (inaudible)_____. They were not concerned with what Ohio State was doing. They were not concerned with what Texas A&M was doing. They wanted them to be in the form of the Benedictine patron. Now, I think that our school is (inaudible) _____ ought to be in terms of not necessarily totally but in terms of Martin Luther King, in terms (inaudible)_____ Malcolm X, in terms of (inaudible)_____, in terms of Mordecai Johnson, in terms of Alan Lotts. You just cannot take . . .

Take, for instance, right now, I could go to our science department or our agriculture department and ask the young people, "Tell me something about George Washington Carver. Why was he a scientist? What kind of science did he do? What made him a great scientist?" And somehow or another, we failed to teach that. Now, you are not going to get that necessarily at MIT but you certainly could get it at Prairie View or Texas Southern, Alcorn (inaudible)_____.

IH: Yes, that is your tradition.

AIT: And this is what we need to be (inaudible)_____ on and I am not saying we should get locked into a black mentality because that is . . . we should have never gotten locked into that. But we certainly should hold onto the strengths of our heritage and develop it. Regretfully, by the infiltration of non-African Americans into the community,

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the university community where they have not been given orientation and by some of us not wanting to perpetuate that where it would gradually lose _____, I fear, I am really impressed with the Asian culture as a perpetuation of the best that is Asian. We see that happening out at Berkeley where 26% of the student body now, that is going to affect that culture. The Indians. Look in the medical (inaudible)_____. You go in the medical clinics here now - some of the brightest doctors you have got are in the medical clinics, even here in the Texas Medical Center, are Asian doctors. They have a culture that they perpetuate. African Americans, through its historical black colleges, has a rich, rich education heritage and we should bring forth a mixture in my judgment of the best from the past and the best from the present.

IH: I agree. Can you discuss the climate at PV during the Civil Rights era and Black Power Movement?

AIT: Yes, we had a very interesting situation at Prairie View because we were locked into the state scene, the national scene and the local scene. Now, at the local scene, they did not allow African Americans to vote and they specifically did not allow students to vote. So, that became a major challenge at the local scene at Hempstead of getting the students, the black students (inaudible)_____ Prairie View to vote. Now, the problem you had there is you had more students enrolled at Prairie View than you had at Hempstead _(inaudible)_____. So, if you allowed . . . and they saw that really clearly . . . if you allowed some 5,000, 6,000 students from the university to vote against 2,000 from Waller or Hempstead, you would have an upset that would be just fantastic.

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But that was a major that was cause for court cases, local leaders to emerge and what have you. From the standpoint of the national scene, I think, to some extent, the students felt that they were kind of left out, were not in the urban (inaudible)_____. Now, at Texas Southern, they were a little bit more because they did do a sit-in here at the local Foleys and they had some other activists here - Dr. Lawson and others here - so they were a little bit more in an urban setting. But at Prairie View, being a rural city, they were just sort of out on the fringe so they were sympathetic and engaged when they could into the national movements but essentially, they had their own battle right there in Hempstead and Waller, Texas.

IH: Dr. Wolfolk . . .

AIT: George Wolfolk.

IH: He has written the history of (inaudible)_____. What can you tell me about Dr. Wolfolk?

AIT: Wolfolk was a historian of the South. He came out of Kentucky. Well, a lot of black historians came out of Kentucky for that matter and came to Prairie View and he and another gentleman by the name of Bullock, (inaudible)_____ Bullock, when I first got to Prairie View, they were the first two who were leading the historical movement about education and the South in general. Wolfolk had just about come out with this book about that time and he was writing some other areas of history, particularly on the

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cotton regency in the South and what have you. A very (inaudible)_____ man. And Bullock conducted what he called a conference each year and he brought together leaders from all over the state. He got to the point where he began to irritate the whites with some of his pronouncers. His pronouncers started getting (inaudible)_____ to be anti power struck and they started to move to shut him down because he was showing the inequities largely in education, the inequities in opportunities for young students to learn. And Bullock left Prairie View and came to Texas Southern, ran into the same problem at Texas Southern and went to the University of Texas, and I think there is where he died of a broken heart, in my judgment. Now, I may be wrong about what I am saying but he was never put on the history faculty at University of Texas. They have a special place they can put you in because they feel that our little enclave of what constitutes legitimate historians does not include you because you are not necessarily a pure historian. You are a sort of writer of history.

IH: Yes. Well, that much there is just enough to keep you out.

AIT: So, Bullock in my judgment . . . I may be wrong in what I am saying . . . I think he died of a broken heart because he felt he was never accepted and he was not.

IH: What year that?

AIT: Oh, I don't remember the years.

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IH: The 1970s, do you think?

AIT: Yes. He never was accepted. He never was accepted as part of the history faculty. He never was considered to be a historian. And, you know, that is pretty tough when a guy believes he is a historian and he appears . . .

IH: Yes, O.K. Just wrapping up, maybe two more questions. One is as president of PV, again, 1963 to 1973 we are looking at, how did you envision the Vietnam War when all that was going, about American involvement and what was happening?

AIT: Well, we never, as a university per se or even students per se got into what you called the anti-war movement, anti-Vietnamese War movement largely because there were so many of our students that ended up there, so many of our officers from ROTC ended up there, so it was for us, largely participatory thing, a positive thing, a patriotic thing, and we just did not get into this heavy African American anti-war movement.

IH: And your personal feelings were that we should have been in Vietnam?

AIT: No, the Vietnam situation has some parallels to the current situation in Iraq. (Inaudible)_____ question about when (inaudible) _____ decided it could not contain that Vietnamese situation. The question comes up what would be the justification to make us think we should deal with it. If that had been left studied about why France said the hell with it, I am leaving, somebody either Kissinger or Nixon should have said, wait

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a minute, what are we doing? Why are we going in there? And then, of course, I think the other thing that we have misinterpreted in my judgment 2 or 3 times and that is the nature of armed warfare. When we went into World War II, now that is not necessarily true of the Pacific. But we could do what we call saturated bombing, we could go through those cities like Cologne and those cities and just bomb everything out of there (inaudible)_____ by this power bombing. Well, when you go into the jungle, come on now, what are you going to bomb? Trees? These guys have dug into tunnels, you see. I think we misunderstood it. And then when we got into it, I guess we just felt the deeper we got into it, maybe the better we would get out of it. But it does not work like that sometimes and it certainly did not work there. And that is where this anti-Vietnamese sentiment starts coming in and (inaudible) _____. Then, of course, the other thing that happened, it is very similar to what is happening now, is the faulty intelligence and the lack of truth.

IH: The first casualty of war is truth.

AIT: That is correct. And when that happened and nobody would admit that Johnson got so far over his head but he had to admit we have got to come out of here. Kissinger and Nixon just kept piling on, piling on and piling on, and nobody would tell the truth. Of course, here is what Eisenhower warned us about, this industrial military. I mean, it becomes self feeding. And the economics of it. And that is (inaudible)_____. When you combine the industrial war power with capitalism, you have a problem on your hand because capitalism is not a moral undertaking. Capitalism is a profit at any price. You

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see, that is what you have got to . . . and that is why we have this great dilemma that we have not tackled (inaudible)_____ and that is the conflict between capitalism and democracy. They are two different ideas. I am in capitalism for making a profit. If you do die as a part of that, so be it. You are unable to survive. Democracy says no. Democracy says the welfare of all the people. Two different things. We have not resolved that yet. That is what you get, and Eisenhower was warning us about, the use of that industrial military complex - exactly what you have got now and of course it has taken on an interesting (inaudible) _____ and I am getting off the subject here. It is taking an interesting (inaudible) _____ because in the Vietnam situation, it was all oriented towards the military but in this one, the current conflict in Iraq, we have split it into two parts: we have given one part to the private enterprise and Haliburton, and we have given the other part to the military. So now, we are going to war with the Defense Department, we are going to war with the capitalistic economic environment. And keep in mind those guys are not going to sit down and give up that money. They have industrial accidents all the time so for a contractor to have a military accident, that is the name of the game. Now, somebody needs to go back and study that whole philosophy of how we got to mixing up private enterprise with the Defense Department to fight a war. See, the Army has outsourced a lot of its capacity, from cooking . . . when I was in the Army in World War II, we cooked our own food. I mean, they have got Haliburton cooks over there and they cook the food and serve it to the military. So, it is an interesting thing. You have chosen a very interesting area for your career if you are going to stay there, and not only that, I think that you can become . . . if you set your sights on it, you can become imminent in your field.

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IH: I hope so. Well, this is my very last question. What about Prairie View would you like people to know that has not been written or emphasized enough of the university?

AIT: Well, to me, starting at Prairie View as a student, there is one simple thing that we should be branding - (inaudible)_____ starting with the faculty, the same thing we should be (inaudible) _____, starting with the curriculum, one thing we should be (inaudible)_____, starting with the public, one thing we should be (inaudible)_____ - and that is the quality of the individuals that attend that school, learn at that school and graduate. We have a slogan that says Prairie View produces productive people. If we can, in each student's mind, say, my life is going to be productive. I am a Prairie View graduate, Prairie View produces productive people and I am going to be productive in whatever I (inaudible)_____, you as a historian, in my judgment, should say to yourself - I am not just going to walk through this life. I am going to be productive in my own right. Now, the faculty should say, I am here to cause you to be productive - whether you want to be productive or not, I am here to cause you to be productive, and I am going to give you experiences that are going to lead you to productivity. I am going to define or help you define what productivity is, whether it is in a poem or some music note or some historical article or in (inaudible)_____, you are going to be productive. And I am not going to let you escape from it. It is one reason why I have an objection to online teaching. Just imagine if you are a Christian and Jesus would come back here and say I am going to distribute my word online. You have got to sit at the feet of a historian

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and listen to him and he has got to talk to you and you have got to talk to him, and he has got to challenge you on what you are thinking as an historian and why you think that way, why do you want to go that way? That professor should be an influence on you. One of the greatest experiences I have had - I had great teachers, great teachers. _____ . The same thing with the curriculum. I challenge my people in sociology. You all are wasting your time. You have no knowledge of what is going on out here in the community in terms of crime and (inaudible)_____. You should relate what you are doing to what is happening out here in our community. Why did this man follow this 11 year old boy and shoot him in the back with a shotgun? You do not discuss that in your sociology class. So, the curriculum should influence you in terms of what you (inaudible)_____ and then the public should understand that is what we are all about - producing people, capital, human capital that can go out here and function in a global society. So, I wish I could convey that (inaudible)_____ people hear me say that, even the student, you see. The student is so busy working at Wal-Mart, they are so busy with their private apartment life, they are so busy with something, they are not reflecting on where they are going. It does not make any difference . . . even a nursing student here, she is not going back, in my judgment, and this is what I think you will feel is so fascinating, and if I asked the average student here in this nursing school give me 10 great nurses and tell me about their life and how they became great, they might not be able to give me one. Now, how are you going to learn what a great nurse is unless . . . now, this is what is good about your field because you have got a lot of (inaudible)_____. It is the same thing here. It is the same thing about any of those fields - you should study these things, emulate these people and find out what they did good and

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what they did bad and find a way for yourself. So, to me, it is the (inaudible) _____. It isn't the president, it isn't the buildings, it isn't any of that. It is how you become meaningful in terms of your own life and how you are going to become meaningful in terms of deciding what you want. I mean, I realize you are not going to get many Martin Luther King, Jrs. but you are certainly going to be able to get some people in their own way that might be equal to him. If you do no more than influence your own children or the children in your neighborhood. Purpose for your life. And that purpose for your life ought to be sure that you made something out of yourself and made something out of the society in which you live.

IH: Right (inaudible) _____ the community. Excellent, thank you.