

Interviewee: DR. STEWART FULBRIGHT

Interviewer: Michael Smith

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Topic: An oral history with Dr. Stewart Fulbright. Born December 11, 1919 in Springfield, Missouri, Dr. Fulbright served in the Tuskegee Airmen during World War Two, and afterward earned a Ph.D. in Business Administration from Ohio State in 1953. After many years as a faculty member and administrator at North Carolina Central University, Dr. Fulbright retired in 1982.

DR. STEWART FULBRIGHT

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STEWART FULBRIGHT: My name is Stewart Fulbright, and I was born December 11, 1919 in Springfield, Missouri.

MICHAEL SMITH: And what was your childhood like there?

SF: Very poor and a lot of fun. I had two brothers and a sister, and my parents. And we had, for that time, I started to say an unusually loving home but I guess most of my peers were brought up in the same kind of circumstances. But it was a very good childhood. I remember my parents bought some kind of an easel that had letters on it, and all of us were taught how to read by our parents before we started school. I was always interested in reading, I remember when I was in junior high school my folks moved to Los Angeles, and in the summer I would go to the library and check out three books in the morning, read them during the day and night and take them back the next morning to get three

more. And I did that for most of the summer, even when my folks told me that I was reading too much and I did the same old trick that a lot of kids do, get under the cover with a flashlight. It was that kind of childhood, very good. We were there in the midst of the Great Depression, and neither parent was working and we had a struggle. My uncle, who really never that I can recall had a steady job, he was a dog trainer, and there wasn't much demand for that profession during the Depression, but he talked us out of going on welfare, going on relief it was called in those days, and so he said the Fulbrights have too much pride. And he wasn't bringing in a quarter, but he maintained the Fulbright pride, and we almost starved. We managed to get by somehow. And then after finishing high school I had a scholarship, I was the salutatorian of my high school class, the girl that was valedictorian was not going to a Missouri school, and there at that time the state of Missouri furnished a scholarship to the top student in every high school class in the state. There was only one university for blacks at that time, that was Lincoln University and my scholarship was for fifty dollars, and that fifty dollars was enough to cover tuition for the entire year, and room rent for four months. Tuition was sixteen dollars a semester, and room rent was four dollars a month. That was back in 1937. After that year, then it was up to my parents and me to provide for the expenses of college. Somehow we managed, I worked my sophomore, junior, and senior years, couldn't find a job my freshman year. But that's when I had the big fifty dollar scholarship. So that was pretty much the way I grew up.

MS: What did you plan to do when you graduated?

SF: Well, that was always a problem back then, because job opportunities were so limited. I had a major in French, I started out as a chemistry major because I liked science

and it came pretty easy and was offered a job as a lab assistant for my sophomore year. However I was also offered a job as assistant to the proctor of the manager of the dormitory, which to me was a better job. And I had become, I did very well in chemistry but I had decided that was not for me. And I floated around for a year, didn't know what I wanted to do, and finally talked to a friend and he said that he was majoring in French and he was going to be an interpreter. Well, that sounded good, so I had had a couple years of French in high school, and I decided that I would major in French too, because it came pretty easy to me. However in my junior year I was looking around for an elective, and my roommate was a business administration major and he suggested that I take a course in business organization. I did and fell in love with that field, so I decided that I would take every course that I could get in, in business, and I think I'm the only graduate of that University who had a major in French, a minor in business administration, well actually I came up almost a major, I was six hours short of a major, I couldn't get any more business courses in, and I knew that my parents had struggled so much to keep me in school, they were, my mother was doing odd jobs and everything she could to send me enough money to supplement what I was making on the little jobs that I had and I knew I could not call on them, or would not call on them for help beyond four years, so for that reason I didn't change my major, I kept the major in French, and took everything else I could get in business. And then, as luck would have it, after graduating, the head of the French department asked me what I was planning on doing, I said, "look for a job," and he said, "well, how would you like to teach here," and I said "here at Lincoln?" and he said "yeah, I think you can handle a couple of freshmen courses," because he was going to be away that year. They gave me a job with the rank of assistant instructor. I didn't

know at the time that there was no such rank in higher education. But, they did the same thing with a couple of my classmates, so there were three of us who finished that year who were given jobs as assistant instructors. This was back in 1941, and they told us that we could teach for one year without having a masters degree, so I taught that year, and then someone else in the department was going away the next year, so they changed the policy so that I could teach another year. However during the summer I was about to be drafted and I knew that if you enlisted in the air force, or at that time it was the army air corps, that it took a long time before they were able to get you in, all black pilot trainees were sent to Tuskegee. And so I volunteered for that, and was very lucky. I had, an interesting thing in that the minimum weight was 125 pounds, and I didn't weigh quite 125 pounds, so that night I had to go to Camp Crowder, Missouri for my examination I got on the bus and I had a lot of bananas, and I ate these bananas figuring that that with some water would give me enough weight to make the minimum. As it turned out when I got there there were twenty-one white guys and me, as the only black guy being examined. So they had us to go eat breakfast, well that was okay, that helped my weight problem, and then instead of taking the physical exam first, they gave us a mental exam, a written exam, and eight of us of the 22 passed that and then they sent us to lunch. And I'm trying to hold everything in, so that I won't lose any weight. And that afternoon we went for our physical. Two of us passed the physical, and the last thing on the physical exam was getting weighed, and as soon as I stepped off the scale I asked them, "where is the restroom," and ran. But it found out later that at that time, that was 1941, I found out later that out of the 22 with two of us passing, that the rate was approximately ten percent

of those who applied were actually accepted for pilot training, and so I was fortunate enough to be one of the ten percent that took the exam at that time.

MS: What was Tuskegee like when you got there, at the airbase?

SF: Oh boy, that was a real experience. I had never seen anything or experienced anything quite like it. First thing, I know I had a very nice suit, and it was traumatic to box that up and send it back to my parents and start wearing the GI clothes that were issued. Our unit in the air force at least, down in Tuskegee, had been influenced by the experience of some West Pointers in that were required to learn what were called dodo verses. And if any upperclassmen saw you at anytime, anywhere he could ask you to recite dodo verses, and you had to do that without a mistake, and if you made the slightest mistake they would do what was called bracing you, which usually meant that you would stand up beside a wall, and then bend your knees, keeping your back straight, which put a lot of pressure on your thighs. And sometimes they would move you up a button or down a button, which meant they would hold a finger toward a button on your shirt, and you would move up or down, and it was tremendous physical pressure on you at that time. And not only you had that, but then they would ask you to do these dodo verses at the same time, the only one I have any memory of is, they would ask the question, "well how is a cow," and the answer was, "sir, the cow is the female of the bovine species who excretes lacteal fluid and is highly prolific to the nth degree," something on that regard, but there were a whole series of these things that we had to memorize, and the upperclassmen would do that. Theory was that that helped in your physical and mental development which would come in handy if you were a fighter pilot as most of us were slated for at that time. There was a change later though for some of us

and we went into bomber training instead of fighter pilot training.

MS: What other kind of training did you receive?

SF: At Tuskegee? Well, the flight program involved the first two months, it was strictly a ground school, and we studied weather, we studied instruments, we studied theory of flight, Morse Code, oh I don't know, a lot of other subjects, technical in nature most of it. And then after the first few months, we left the airbase and went over to, which was at that time called Tuskegee Institute, later it was changed to Tuskegee University, and all the cadets in primary training did so living on the campus and flying at a field that was owned by the University. And so we learned how to fly there. We would have flying, for the first month we would fly in the morning, and then go to ground school in the afternoon. And ground school was something unlike any school I had ever attended, high school or college, because we had an examination in every subject, every week, and if your average was 95 or better on all the combined subjects, then you were OK. If your average came out between I think it was 85 and 95, then you had to go to ground school three nights a week. If it was between 75 and 85 you had to go to ground school every night for the whole, five nights a week. And if it were below 75 you were confined to the barracks on Saturday and Sunday as well as going to ground school every night. As it turned out our class and most of the classes at Tuskegee had the highest scholastic averages in the Southeast Training Command, and I guess it was because of that. Most of us ended up going to ground school three nights a week. It was a very, very interesting life. However, only about fifty percent of those entering the flight program were able to complete it, the others were washed out along the way, and then they went into various other fields in the air force. My class, when we were in advanced training, the

newspapers, the black newspapers in the country, had carried on a campaign asking the question, why is it that none of our boys are flying bombers? Those who had finished the cadet school and went in the fighter group, they were doing very well in Italy or Africa at that time. So the government yielded to the pressure of the papers and decided to start a twin-engine or bomber training program in advanced, and a class ahead of us had been in fighter pilot training in the advanced program for one month, and they took half of them and put them in bomber training. My class was the first one to start out and take twin-engine bomber training all the way through advanced training after we'd finished basic. So we were able fortunately to get through the program. It was a great day when you were commissioned a second lieutenant after that.

MS: What was your opinion of the officers that you encountered in training?

SF: The officers, it varied. It depended pretty much on the individual. There were some officers that were extremely good, extremely fair, and there were others who were, most of considered very poor and quite unfair. I remember one that I disliked a lot, he would come by and if there's anything wrong, a little wrinkle on your forehead when they made inspection like that, his favorite expression was, "you're supposed to be the best of your race, and look at you." And you know, that sort of thing would be carried on, just continuously. But, the commanding officer of the base while I was there in cadet school was a man named Parrish. Colonel Noel Parrish. He was outstanding, all of the guys really respected him, and appreciated him. And he remained very friendly with some of the guys throughout the rest of his life. I mean long after the war was over and the base had been disbanded. In fact, several years ago I was visiting my daughter in Washington, at that time she was working for NASA, and the Tuskegee Airmen in the Washington

area, that chapter had a program at NASA headquarters where my daughter worked, and I had seen one or two guys that I knew from being in the service prior to this particular day when they had a meeting. And Colonel Parrish's widow was there at the meeting, and I remember that I along with a lot of other guys went up to her and just expressed to her how much we thought of her husband. He was a terrific guy.

MS: How did the servicemen at the base at Tuskegee get along with the local civilians?

SF: We didn't have much contact with them, very frankly. When we were there for the eight or nine months that we were at Tuskegee most of our activities were on the base.

When we were in primary training we were at the campus at Tuskegee Institute, and that was all black, and so that was comfortable. The townspeople in Tuskegee, we didn't have as I say much contact with them, and it was pretty much very nice, because those persons in Tuskegee, well there had been people there long before I came, and the college or the university was right there, and they had pretty good relationships I think. It was, a lot of times in other towns we would run into crazy kinds of problems. I remember we were at Godman Field, Kentucky, which is outside of Louisville, about 30 miles or so from Louisville, and I remember one night we were at the bus station getting ready to get rides to go back to the base, and there were a couple friends of mine, one guy was very fair, and another guy was not quite as dark as I am, but he was dark. And all of us decided to sit at what was the white counter in the restaurant in the bus station, and the poor little waitress she came up and said, "I'm sorry that I can't serve you," and one of the guys, the guy sort of in-between color, said I don't blame you, and she said, "what are you?" He said, "I'm Spanish," and his name was Velasquez, and she said, "OK, you're all right." And then she talked to Joe Whiten, the very fair guy and said, "what are you," and Joe

hollered, "I'm an American." And she was really caught in a dilemma, she didn't know what to do. Because some white soldiers were in the restaurant, and they were saying, "serve the guys, we fought with them overseas," and all that. She, I think the manager finally came out and told her she could not serve us, and we left. But it was interesting that she was going to be willing to serve the guy whose name was Velasquez, but not a guy who was almost white whose name was Joe Whiten. But it was, there were always comical incidents, or which turned out to be comical, that happened. And yet there were some that were pretty serious, very bad ones that happened along the way.

MS: Were there many accidents during training?

SF: Not many, not many. I think during our class I know one guy, it seems to me there may have been two, in our class who were killed during the training process. But, they were the, the instruction that we got was excellent, and one thing that really surprised most of us when we first got there was that in primary training, now this was back in 1941 when I was there, all of the instructors, the entire thing was black. Nothing but African Americans. I didn't know that there were that many black guys who knew how to fly! But all of them in primary training were black. And then when we went, left Tuskegee campus and went back to the airbase all of the instructors were white army officers, army air corps officers. And I was fortunate, I had some good ones that were very fair. One instructor, he was a character, I was in basic training at this time, and he would take me up on a flight and if I had done a pretty good job at whatever we were supposed to do that day, sometimes he would take me over to a field, and say, "OK," he'd pull the throttle back and say, "forced landing." And so I had to be able to pick out the field. And it was always this same field, so I knew where we were going. And what

would happen is that we'd go in for a landing, I would land the plane, and then he would tell me to take off and fly for about fifteen minutes and come back and pick him up. He had a girlfriend that was there, and she was the daughter of the local sheriff, and he got in pretty good with him because he would fly around and he would see a still, the smoke from a still, he would go back and call the sheriff and tell him where it was, and that put him in pretty good. That was certainly an interesting phase of my life. They had never intended that the bomb group go overseas, and we went through one training program after another. When we finished cadet school they sent us to Mather Field in California to learn how to fly the B-25 bomber which was what we wound up with, as a 25 outfit. And the white cadets, or not cadets, lieutenants who, we were all there learning how to fly this, and they were staying pretty much in segregated barracks, but would eat together in the dining hall and like that, this was before our group came, the other group I told you, the class ahead of me, had been were actually one month ahead of us, they had been there. But when we got to Mather Field the guys told us we were not going to eat in the officers club, because some general had come by and had seen a white guy flying as pilot and a black guy as copilot and vice versa, and that was all right, we were all together in the classrooms for ground study, however, he couldn't stand it in the, to see us eat together in the mess hall. And so he ordered that two tables be set up in the back of the mess hall for the black pilots. So, everybody refused to eat there. We started eating in the PX. And on Christmas Day, and this made some of the newspapers around, the white women that worked in the PX all volunteered to work without pay to feed us on Christmas Day that year. And of course we thanked them but refused, and some of the black enlisted men invited us to come and eat with them, at their mess hall, so that's what

we did. But, all of this kind of stuff, you know, from time to time you'd just run into strange things. But often it was an individual who did it. The commanding officer of that base in California was almost in tears when he explained to the guys what had happened, but that's the way things were. So, when I got a chance to get out, some of the guys stayed in, but I took the first opportunity I could to get out because I wanted to get back into education. I learned that I really enjoyed teaching, but I didn't enjoy teaching French. I knew I liked that profession, and I said, well I'm going to go to graduate school and get an MBA, so that's what I did. After I got out of the service I went to the University of Chicago and got an MBA there.

MS: What year did you get out of the service?

SF: It was 1945. And so I went to the University of Chicago, and managed to get an MBA. And I didn't find out until years later that I was among the first ten African Americans to get an MBA from the University of Chicago. Then, I started applying for jobs and got a job at North Carolina Central. And so after a couple years here at Central I took a year's leave and went to Ohio State to start working on a doctorate. And the reason I selected Ohio State, I had been accepted at New York U, and one or two other places, but I decided that I had never seen Big 10 football, and I knew that Ohio State had a good team. Look, I didn't know anything about the academic program or anything else, I figured that a school like that, it had to have a pretty good academic program, but I was looking for good football. So I enrolled and finally finished up my doctorate in 1953.

MS: What were your experiences at Chicago and Ohio State? How were you treated there? How did you like it?

SF: Of all places, at Chicago, I ran into one really, well I don't know whether he was prejudiced or not, it appeared that way to me. A lot of the classes I was the only black in the class. All of them, I think I was treated just fine, except this one. And this guy, and this was a course I didn't even need, it was an advanced statistics course, because I had done very well in the first course I had taken, and decided to go on and take some additional courses. The guy would use the term, "nigra," and I was the only one in there. There was nothing in the statistics book about Negroes or anything else like that, nothing. He would bring it in. And one day I cursed him out. And I'm still kind of fresh from being a GI and willing to fight for my country and all that, and this guy's up there doing this. And so the unfortunate thing about that was, I was taking that course in the quarter that I was graduating, and all the graduates had to take exams early, so we didn't take the exam along with the rest of the class. I'd made nothing but As and Bs on tests and papers, and when I saw the exam that he gave me, there was nothing on there that I had ever seen or heard of before. So, I wrote a little something and handed the paper to him, and I said, well, even flunking this test, and I know why he gave it to me, but it wouldn't matter, because I had nothing but As and Bs all the rest of it. And it was only about a year later that I found out that he had flunked me for that course. As I said I didn't need it for graduation, but I didn't want to see it on my record. So, one summer, both my brothers at that time were living in Chicago, and I went back to visit, and I went out to the University to see the dean and explain to him what had happened. The only reason that I knew about it was because I had sent for a transcript because I was getting ready to start applying for doctoral programs somewhere, and that's when I discovered I had that F. And the dean told me to see, that he would certainly recommend that he would, or would approve it if

the teacher would, the instructor would change it to registered. They had a grade called R, which just registered for the course without a grade. I saw this guy, and he said sure I'll be glad to change it, but he never did. So I still have that F on my record. That means throughout, from grade school through doctoral program, I have two Fs. That one, and I had one when I was enrolled at Lincoln University, Missouri, because a phys ed teacher would not, there was a conflict, I had signed up for a course, and there was a conflict between a phys ed class and an English class, the English class was a continuation of a class I had taken before. The phys ed teacher refused to permit me to drop his course, he said, "drop English." No way! And he gave me an F. So those were my two failures in education. I was at Central when I went back to Ohio State, and I had a year's leave, and I was able to complete all the course work with two summers and a full year, and then it took me two or three years more before I finished a dissertation.

MS: How did Durham compare with other places you had lived, when you came here?

SF: When my wife and I left Chicago to come here, we had decided that what we would do, we would stay five years, save some money and then go back to the Midwest, where we both had lived for all the previous portion of our lives, and fell in love with Durham. And at the end of that five years, we talked to each other and said, no, this is it. We'll stay right here. I loved working at North Carolina Central. I was moving along nicely, and had been given opportunities to go into administration, and the like. The people were so friendly. I remember our first Christmas here, we had just moved into a duplex, and people that we hadn't even met from across the street came and brought presents of pots and pans and stuff like that. We remained friends with those folks, well we still are for those who are still living. But that was the key, I liked my job, I liked my work, I liked

the city, I've had an opportunity to see it change and grow, because we came here in 1947, so we've been here over 50 years now. It's really been a tremendously warm and very good experience. Durham has really meant a lot to my family. My kids, well I started to say they were born here, but my daughter was born in New York, my wife had to go there for some medical treatment, so my daughter was born there. My son was born here. My daughter had worked for NASA, and then she worked for the Peace Corps. She's now with Americorp, and lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. My son and his wife are both CPAs and they have a business here in Durham. And they have my granddaughter, and that is the love of my life. Four and a half years old, going on forty-four I think.

MS: What classes did you teach at Central?

SF: At Central, when I came here there wasn't a whole lot of specialization. And we had a very limited faculty and had to teach about everything. My specialty if you call it that was insurance. But I've taught accounting, I've taught marketing, I've taught real estate, anything that we could handle on an elementary level. At that time with very limited staff we had, back in the early days, nobody in what we used to call the commerce department had a doctorate degree. Over the years though it changed and several of us, now I think practically all of them that are in the school of business. I was dean, the first dean of the school of business, the department of commerce had gotten so large that it was administratively impossible to handle it. We had at one time close to two thousand students in commerce, and so we did form the school of business. I was, well, in 1966 I believe it was, after the, let's see, I'm a little hazy on my recollection that far back, but at any rate we didn't have a president at that time and there was an interim committee, a committee made up of the business manager, and the undergraduate dean, and the graduate

dean. And they formed the committee. They had called me over one evening, that group, and when I walked in they told me, congratulations, you're now the acting dean of the undergraduate school. And I said, oh no I'm not. At any rate, they prevailed and I was acting dean of the undergraduate school, which later they changed it to the school of Arts and Sciences. At any rate, did that for a year and then we got a new president, Dr. Whiting from Maryland, came in as president, and I told him, I said look, bring a dean with you. And he said, no, coming in as a new president, if I have to come in with a new dean too, so he asked me to stay on for a year, and I did. And at the end of that year, they appointed the person who had been chairman of the business department, the commerce department we called it then, had left and I was named the chairman of the commerce department. And then later we figured that the best thing to do was to try to form a school of business, which we did and I was named the first dean of that, kept it for three years. I didn't like administrative work. I preferred teaching, which was the reason I got into education in the first place, because I liked that. So I served as dean of the school of business for three years, and then went back to teaching and also director of graduate studies.

MS: Are there any other ways you can think of that the University changed while you were there?

SF: Oh yes, it changed tremendously. To give you an example of the changes, this was physical, of course there were all kinds of academic changes which have taken place, but when I first went there, there was big room on the second floor of the administration building, which had three or four desks on it. One desk was for commerce, one desk was for English, one was something else, and the only office that male teachers had, there was

a little table on the ground floor in the men's faculty restroom. That was the only, if we could call that office space, because you had to take turns with the desk on the second floor, and usually the chairman of the department was the one who sat at the desk most of the time, so the teachers didn't have any. That was the conditions, of course that was back in 1947, and later they built a building for commerce. And it's still called the commerce building, because was a common name for business back in the thirties and early forties, I guess. The changes which have been made are really tremendous. There has been the development of our, we already had a law school when I came here in 1947, I don't know when it was established. But we had a law school, and our school of business was the second school to be established outside of the arts and sciences. And since then they've had the school of library science, wait a minute the school of library science may have preceded the school of business, I'm not sure. The school of education has just built a tremendous building for education, which was occupied this past school year, in addition. So other changes, the administrative hierarchy certainly has expanded tremendously. Student services, just about every aspect of higher education that you can think of, has seen tremendous changes over the 50 or so years in the past. Of course that's true for I guess for every school that has been able to survive. Of course, all of the changes bring about new problems, and so I don't envy them at all!

MS: When did you retire?

SF: I retired in 1982, I was 62 and I remember telling the dean of the school of business at that time, I said, look, I'm 62 years old, I've been continuously employed since I was 12 years old, and that was true, I've managed somehow to hold onto a job just about all of that time, and I said fifty years of work is enough for me! So I'm giving it up. So I

retired in 1982. Fortunately people in other places heard that I was retiring, and I had seven job offers within two months after I retired, and I was very happy to turn down all of them.

MS: Are there any special leisure activities you enjoy these days?

SF: Yeah, six other guys and I, there used to be seven others, but there are seven of us that love to play golf, and we play golf just about every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday if the weather is good, we're all fair weather golfers. So that is my primary leisure activity. I am pretty active in my church, I belong to Covenant Presbyterian Church, and have been a member of it since 1948, and we're engaged in a building program right now, hopefully getting ready in the next few months to start building a new church building, and so I along with some others are pretty heavy engaged in that.