PRESERVING MEMORY: NEWARK AND RUTGERS
IN THE 1960’S AND 1970’S

An Interview with

ROBERT CURVIN

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

NOVEMBER 30, 1991
GILBERT COHEN: This is Saturday, November 30, 1991. This is Gil Cohen. I am meeting with Dr. Robert Curvin in his home in South Orange.

ROBERT CURVIN: Newark.

COHEN: Okay. Newark, New Jersey. Okay. We’ll leave it at that. [Break in recording] Okay. We’re back with Dr. Curvin. And we were talking before, if you could supply biographical, academic, career background to get us started.

CURVIN: Well, I went to high school in Belleville, New Jersey, and graduated in 1952. And a year after that I entered the US Army. I volunteered to go into service. And I spent a little better than five years in the military and came out as a first lieutenant. And enrolled in Rutgers-Newark.

COHEN: What year was that?

CURVIN: That was in 1957. And I, with the combination of the Army experience where I had taken some courses and summers and so on, I finished in 1960. And then in 1960, upon my graduation, I went to work for the Essex County Welfare Board. And in the course of working for the welfare board after about three and a half, four years, I enrolled in a graduate program at the Rutgers University School of Social Work. And earned a master’s degree eventually through that program; even though by the time I finished, I had left the welfare board and was working in New York. And then in 1970 I began a Ph.D. program at Princeton University and completed that program, at least the residency part of it, in ’74 and then defended my dissertation in February of ’75, earning the Ph.D.

COHEN: In?

CURVIN: In political science.

COHEN: In political science.

CURVIN: Right.

COHEN: What was your thesis on?

CURVIN: I wrote my thesis on the first four years of Gibson’s administration?

COHEN: Oh!
CURVIN: In Newark. So it was really an effort to look at the current debate about pluralism in urban communities and evaluate the question as to whether or not minorities in a pluralistic system had sufficient veto power to protect themselves against the injurious decisions of the majority. And the answer—or the question—for Newark was, given that a minority had become a majority, to what extent could one then test the question? So at least on a short-term basis, I tried to evaluate the existing debate in the context of Gibson’s first four years.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Before you applied for Rutgers as a student, what were your perceptions of the university in terms of its reputation and standards and all that sort of business?

CURVIN: Well, I literally began applying for Rutgers from afar. I was still in the Army when I initially decided to try to enroll in the university. I knew that I wanted to stay in the area. And to be perfectly frank, I didn’t have any deep, broad knowledge about the extent the university was different from any other institution that a relatively young black had to deal with in American society. In that day and age, as you know well, most institutions, North or South, had very, very clear double standards. And if one was alert enough, they just had to assume that that was going to be the case. Whether you were in the Army, where I was, or going to college, you would assume that to some extent that would have to be true.

COHEN: How were the double standards manifested?

CURVIN: Well, very often in terms of the way in which you were judged or treated. I mean for example I grew up in this area. I lived in the Silver Lake section of Belleville for most of my life. But in my youth I can remember many institutions in this area being literally closed to blacks, even though there wasn’t very much written about it. Every time you read about segregation, you read about the South. But, for example, I can’t swim; and one of the reasons I can’t swim is that most of the kids that I grew up with when they went swimming, I could not go with them because swimming facilities were not open to blacks—or were not integrated I should say. There were some swimming facilities that were generally open to blacks only or in the City of Newark, for example. They had their own city swimming pools. But there was a very well-known amusement park and swimming facility in Irvington called Olympic Park.

COHEN: Yes. I remember it well.

CURVIN: When I grew up, blacks could not use that.

COHEN: Could not use the swimming pool.

CURVIN: Use the swimming pool.

COHEN: Just the park.

CURVIN: That’s right. That’s right. And you remember Dreamland out in Elizabeth, the skating rink?
COHEN: No.

CURVIN: But there was a very popular skating rink, and blacks could use it on Thursday nights and, I believe, Sunday afternoon. But at other times it was…. There was never—I’m sure there was never—no official policy. But you would be turned away at the door if you were black and you showed up there at any other time.

COHEN: How was the double standard manifested in admissions standards to Rutgers?

CURVIN: Well, you know, I’ve frankly—

COHEN: What were the practices?

CURVIN: Yes. Frankly I can’t tell you anything about the admissions practices. All I can say to you is that when I went to Rutgers from 1957 to 1960, there were a relatively small number of black students on the campus. And to be perfectly honest—or to be more accurate about this—I think you have two things working: You may in fact have some active practice of exclusion. But you also have a kind of institutional situation in which many young black kids prefer to go to Southern colleges at that time. Or preferred to go to Southern colleges at that time partly because they thought they would be more comfortable. But perhaps also because they thought they would have a better chance of being treated fairly or getting into schools. It was not until much later, in fact, when this virtual revolution in admissions practices occurred, when colleges really went out and aggressively began to recruit, that they in fact began to take many of the kids that formerly went to colleges in the South.

COHEN: Was there any expectation on the part of the institution that the students— Was there any indication that the students coming from the schools in the area really could not deal with the college experience as Rutgers presented it?

CURVIN: I don’t know. I certainly heard that, you know, later in the later days when we, after the Conklin Hall experience and there were discussions about, you know, how do you really make an urban city university more relevant to the population that lives next door? There was certainly a lot of concern about the quality of education that was taking place in the City of Newark and even in surrounding areas.

COHEN: Yes, yes, yes. Did you feel in your admission effort to get into Rutgers, were you in any way subject to any kind of double standard?

CURVIN: No. Absolutely not. I was…. I think that all that I can recall, in fact, was being treated very fairly. There was actually a desk, as I recall, that handled the veterans’ applications in the admissions office. The individual there was extremely affable, personable, and did everything that she possibly could to help me, you know, work through and get my application approved. And on the campus, in my campus life, I can honestly say that by and large, I had a very positive experience here. I have two scarring incidents relative to race that I experienced at Rutgers, but again, I would put them in the category of being, well, you know, this is America, and this is
basically a white institution. And it was wrong as to what happened, but it was a larger question. One of them—you want me to tell you them?

COHEN: Yes, yes. Because I think this is what really makes the oral history come alive.

CURVIN: Okay. You know the Ugly Man’s Contest on the campus?

COHEN: I remember, yes, yes.

CURVIN: Well, in a sense this is both a funny and a sad story. But one of the sororities that—and as you recall, each of the sororities usually chose a male to sort of represent them in what was really sororities.

COHEN: To select the Ugly Man on campus.

CURVIN: But remember, they would sponsor a candidate whose picture would be posted around the campus. And the idea was to raise money for a charity. And everyone’s vote was really cast by the amount of money they put in these bottles with the picture of the individual person. And one year I was asked to do this by one of the sororities on campus. To be one of the Ugly Men.

COHEN: To be the Ugly Man candidate.

CURVIN: To be the Ugly Man, yes. And so anyway, the fundraising and everything, it all took place. And it was over. I did not win, as best I knew.

COHEN: Right.

CURVIN: A year later the fellow who had won called me and asked if he could meet with me privately. And I said, “Sure,” you know. Why not? So I met him at school, and we had lunch or something and talked. And he said, “I needed to talk to you because I had to tell you what happened last year during the Ugly Man’s Contest. The truth is that you won. But the dean insisted that we not name you as the winner because he thought it would be embarrassing to have you as the winner, where the winner is celebrated at the annual dance and so on and gets to dance with the campus queen and so on.” And he said, “But it bothered me so much that I felt that I had to tell you about that.” And, you know, that’s a kind of scarring thing to happen to someone.

COHEN: The dean then was—

CURVIN: According to this fellow, this was Dean Durand. I do remember him. The dean of students at the time.

COHEN: Dean of students, eh?

CURVIN: Yes, he wasn’t dean of the college.
COHEN: He was dean of the college?

CURVIN: No, I’m saying he wasn’t dean of the college. He was the dean of students.

COHEN: So he was saying dean of students.

CURVIN: Yes, dean of students. Yes. Right.

COHEN: No, the name I remember. I couldn’t, you know….

CURVIN: Yes, I remember him well. And he used to wave to me all the time. “Hi, Bob!” “Nice day.” “How are you?”

COHEN: Nice guy.

CURVIN: “Oh, how you doing, Bob?” [Laughter]

COHEN: About what year was that?

CURVIN: Well, I would say this was like maybe ’59.”

COHEN: Right. About a year or so before you got out.

CURVIN: Yes. The other thing that you know, is a much more important story and a much, in many ways, a much more—a deeper manifestation of what the values and social structure was at that time—is that when I finished at Rutgers, I finished I would say with a pretty fair record. I mean it wasn’t, you know, stellar. But it certainly was…. I was a hardworking student. I had, you know, about a B average. And I also was a veteran. I had been very active on the campus. And by all measures, I think that I was the kind of candidate that Rutgers would be proud to put in to help find a job someplace. And so I went to the placement office, and the placement office gave me a number of places to look and go for interviews and so on. And I looked and I looked and I looked. And I saw students who were, in my estimation, poor students, who students who had not done nearly as well as I had, getting jobs, getting placed in companies and manufacturing businesses and research labs as assistants. And so on. And I could not find a job. In fact to a point where Mr. O’Beckne [sp]….

COHEN: Oh, yes.

CURVIN: Was that his name?

COHEN: Yes. And Jack.

CURVIN: …actually called me up and virtually apologized to me. He said, you know, “I’m really very sorry. I, you know, don’t know what to say about this, but, you know, we just have to keep trying.” In fact it was at that point that Bill Payne, who had graduated from Rutgers also, a
couple of years before me, and was working at the county welfare board, suggested that I take the examination to become a welfare caseworker.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

CURVIN: And so that’s what I did. I went and I took an exam to become a caseworker and got a job at the welfare board, where I worked for the next five years.

COHEN: I want to ask, though, going back to…you felt comfortable applying, and you felt there was no problem in admissions procedure for yourself personally.

CURVIN: Yes.

COHEN: Okay. Why didn’t other black students feel similarly comfortable in applying to Rutgers and meeting admissions standards and all that sort of business? Why did they feel reluctant to or why weren’t they applying in numbers? Yes.

CURVIN: Well, I think that, as I said, I think that there were…. I mean I’m not suggesting that there were not any efforts to limit the number of blacks on the campus. I think there were over something like 1100 students on the entire campus at that time. It was a very small campus.

COHEN: When you first arrived, yes.

CURVIN: When I was there, yes.

COHEN: Was it that low in ‘59? Yes.

CURVIN: Yes, I think so.

COHEN: Or rather from ’57—you said ’57 you started.

CURVIN: ‘Fifty-seven to ’60. Yes.

COHEN: Right.

CURVIN: And I remember this because I do remember, you know, doing some checking and counting. But my guess is that there were no more than 35 minority students on the campus.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

CURVIN: At that time.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.
CURVIN: And again, you know, it’s hard to say. I mean I’m not vouching for the integrity of the process. Frankly my assumption is that most institutions in America practiced some form of bias and discrimination. I mean that was the order of the day.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

CURVIN: But as I said, I, you know, I came out of the Army, and I think I had probably more going for me than most students that were applying. I had out of high school gone into the service and become an Army officer at a very young age. I had a good record. I had taken courses while I was in the service and had done well in them. So I mean it would have been very, very difficult, if not impossible, to say to someone like myself, you can’t come to the state university in the town in which you’re living.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: But as I said, I was treated very fairly, with courtesy and so on, through my process of getting in.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Right. Why was the NAACP chapter established and then dissolved in favor of BOS?

CURVIN: Well, I think the NAACP chapter was dissolved because both Bill Payne was on the campus, and I was on the campus at that time. And we had been very active in the NAACP as youths, as high school youths. And we saw an opportunity to get more young people involved in the causes of civil rights. And Bill really was the leader of that.

COHEN: Of the NAACP?

CURVIN: Of the NAACP.

COHEN: In the founding of it?

CURVIN: The founding of it, right. And I helped, but I must honestly say that Bill was really the spirit behind it. He had been very active in the NAACP as a youth leader. Also on a number of panels with the national NAACP as the youth advisor. So it was a very easy thing to come to us. There were all of these things going on all over the country. The emergence of Martin Luther King. Really, you could see the bubbling up of the sixties in that period. We went to Washington on many of the marches for integration that were led by King during that time. And then when the sit-ins hit, beginning like in 1959 and through ’60, the students—we were part of the group that organized students to go picket Woolworth’s and local establishments.

COHEN: You’re talking about…

CURVIN: At Rutgers.

COHEN: At Rutgers!
CURVIN: Yes.

COHEN: At Rutgers, okay. The people there were involved.

CURVIN: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Was that the time of your involvement in CORE?

CURVIN: No. Actually CORE was organized after—or CORE in Newark at least—was organized after I left Rutgers.

COHEN: Oh. Oh, I see.

CURVIN: And to tell you the God’s honest truth, the NAACP chapter in Newark was so conservative that they weren’t very anxious for more outspoken, militant, aggressive young people to take a role in the chapter. And Bill Payne and I used to talk about this all the time. And he decided to stay in the NAACP. But when CORE emerged on the scene, I felt that I would feel better and accomplish more going off and helping to start a CORE chapter in the area.

COHEN: Going back to the campus, at what point then was the decision made to return the NAACP charter and form BOS here?

CURVIN: To be perfectly honest, Gil, I can’t give you the exact date. I could—I can give you my interpretation of it.

COHEN: Yes. Sure. I think we’re more interested in that.

CURVIN: I think that the shift from NAACP to BOS was clearly a reflection of the changing mood of black students at that time. The students on the campus thought the NAACP label was too conservative, too old-fashioned for them. It also required an almost clear kind of a program affiliation with the other—with the national organization. You had to have a dues structure. You had to have a membership structure and so on. They went to a much more locally-controlled, locally-organized, self-directed kind of organization that allowed them to take initiatives without having to check with the national office or in any way be identified with local leadership. And this occurred, as I recall, sometime in the area of ’67 or ’68 or so, I guess. I guess Richard Roper was the first president of BOS. And he finished in ’68. So it was just about that time—and I think it was, you know, was reflective of the changing mood. I don’t know if it was exactly or if it was before the riots or after the riots in Newark. But my guess is it was probably right at that time, right after the riots. An increasing sense of urgency about social change and improving the conditions for black people in the city and in the country. And it was most reflected on the campuses of America.

COHEN: This may be… you know, the answer to this might be obvious. But what kind of actions were the students looking for at that time specifically?
CURVIN: As I listened to them, the actions were very much aimed at the issues on the campus. And they were at least by the time that I got there—and I guess it was ’68—most of the concern was about the level of student representation on the campus; the extent to which the faculty was integrated, whether there were minority faculty members; and the extent to which the curriculum offered courses that were aimed at issues that they were deeply concerned about: about their history, Afro-American history, art and culture reflective of black people. Issues of that kind.

COHEN: What methods were the students looking for?

CURVIN: Methods?

COHEN: Of protest, of making their point, which the NAACP affiliation did not permit or make possible.

CURVIN: Well, I don’t think it would be fair to say that NAACP did not permit any particular…. I think it was a much more generalized rejection of the NAACP label and a much more generalized kind of feeling that we’ve got to be our own selves. We have to really be in control of this ourselves. And they wanted to call themselves what they were: a Black Organization of Students, as opposed to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which carried for them perhaps a too moderate image of change and progress. And you have to keep in mind that the local NAACP in Newark was very closely associated with the city administration at that time. Yes. Many of the key NAACP leaders in the city were very much involved with the administration.

COHEN: Addonizio. With the Addonizio administration.

CURVIN: The Addonizio administration. That’s right. So it was not, you know, difficult to understand how young students could feel that they wanted to really change their stripes in a sense and look differently to themselves and to the people that they worked with.

COHEN: Now you retained, however, became the advisor to BOS.

CURVIN: To BOS.

COHEN: How did this come about? How did you reach that position?

CURVIN: Well, they never paid me for the contract. [Laughter] As I recall, when I came onto the campus, a number of them came to see me in my office one day and simply asked if I would be willing to serve as the advisor.

COHEN: Now, you were on the faculty teaching—

CURVIN: I was technically not on the faculty.

COHEN: Oh.
CURVIN: I was a member of the extension division and worked for George Tapper, if you remember, the Rutgers Extension Service.

COHEN: Okay.

CURVIN: And then I had an adjunct appointment in the Political Science Department which allowed me to teach a course each semester. So I was not...I mean technically I was not a faculty member. But given the absence of minority faculty on the campus then, everyone seemed willing to stretch whatever rules imagined then to allow me to serve as an advisor and to in many ways participate, and I did not have a vote in the faculty. But I attended faculty meetings and generally participated as a member of the department. The students had also appealed to me to develop a course that they were interested in. And then Walt Weiker, who was chairman of the Political Science Department, at the time had asked me if I would be willing to do that. And that’s how it came about that I taught a course while I was there on the campus.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

CURVIN: When the organization was started, the BOS organization, or even before that, what were sort of the ideological forces that were working, influencing the students? [Break in recording]

COHEN: We’re back on the tape.

CURVIN: Well, to be perfectly honest, I never discerned any coherent ideology in this group. These were young people who had very high aspirations for themselves and also high expectations for the society in general. They knew that it was wrong for certain things to be true, like the relatively small number of minority students from the local community that participated on the campus; the very small number of minority faculty that worked on the campus at that time. And several of them actually worked very hard to find out a lot of information about things like admissions practices. I mean they would immediately—they would go in delegations and meet with people in the admissions office to find out how many black students had been interviewed in the last year? And how many applications they got from students from Newark and so and so? And they began to build up a case. But there wasn’t—I didn’t see any evidence of a coherent philosophy about what should happen. There were students in the program who clearly were more ideological than others in the group. And there were students who were, I think, more deeply nationalistic than other students. But by and large I would consider the mainstream of this group to be young, solidly American kids who really basically wanted a better society. In fact, in my later experiences, when I think about the enormous ideological tensions that existed at times in certain civil rights groups, between those who were much more Leftist-oriented and those who were much more nationalist-oriented and so on, where the ideological differences were quite distinct. I saw none of that in this group, in the students. I saw mainly students who were impatient and felt morally disturbed that things were not—did not appear—to be more balanced and more fair.

COHEN: Who were the leaders in the formative period?
CURVIN: Well, Vickie Donaldson clearly was one of the key leaders. And Vickie is an interesting example, I think, because Vickie’s family came from the South. And she, as a very young adolescent, she had been even associated with some of the civil rights protests in the South. And came with a very, you know, I think simple view of what a more integrated society should look like. It was not, you know, based on any theoretical analysis of the failings of American capitalism or anything like that. It was just simply: This is a society that ought to have a wider place and more options for someone like myself. And Joe Browne. I had known Joe’s family actually for many years. Joe actually grew up in the Silver Lake section of Belleville, the same area that I had grown up in. And Joe lived in a culture very similar to mine, a predominantly Italian community, having learned how to balance the racial divide in order to survive with skill, with diplomacy. But basically, you know, not looking for any major upheaval of this society. Really just looking for changes within the context of what this society had to offer. And now there were a couple of people who I think really, you know, tugged at the edge of this general I would say very, you know, kind of acceptable, moderate view of the way in which society should work. There were two fellows in the group who were brothers actually, who were much more angry than anybody in the group, much more militant than anybody in the group. And they were, you know, they were constantly pushing for more radical actions. And I think that to some extent they had some effect on the group.

COHEN: Who were they?

CURVIN: I don’t know if you remember the Kenshun [sp] Brothers.

COHEN: No.

CURVIN: And I don’t think—

COHEN: Kenshun.

CURVIN: Kenshun Brothers, yes.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: I don’t think any of them ultimately graduated. And, you know, when the administration was seen as being unresponsive to the demands of the students, and there were, you know, periods when the students felt that they were not being listened to very effectively, I think that at those times people like the Kenshuns were much more influential in the group. But I didn’t see them as—I didn’t even see them as the kind of intellectual leaders of the group that Joe Browne and Vickie Donaldson were. Peter Jackson, who is now on the campus—

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: —he was again a very interesting case because again I think that his whole view of all of the events that occurred at the time were much more personal rather than ideological. That Peter was the one who argued that the open admissions solution should be a total open admissions solution. That every student who graduated with a high school diploma should be
admitted to Rutgers University. And as you recall, you know, that was one of the critical elements of the debate.

COHEN: Yes. I wanted to ask about…. I’ve asked people about that. Looking at the original—I think they were original—the 12 original, the 12 demands which became 11 demands, I’m looking for a clear statement of open admissions in the demands. But I don’t find it.

CURVIN: Yes.

COHEN: Now I’m—

CURVIN: Well, it was—

COHEN: Now yet in the unmet demands…. And yet people I’ve talked to, people I’m repeating, that there was an open admissions demand. I guess my question is what was the definition in the demands of open admissions.

CURVIN: Well, the definition was something that stipulated that every student with a high school diploma would be granted an entrance—I guess it was what ultimately became sort of the—what was the program called?

COHEN: Well, the remedial program? Or the Academic Foundations which eventually became the Urban University program, and then it became the Academic Foundations. On the Newark campus, Academic Foundations Center, and then it achieved departmental status and became a regular department of the university. But going through at least the demands, there’s nothing that I could find in the demands which clearly stated all students with a high school diploma would be admitted to the university. And yet this—

CURVIN: Kept coming up.

COHEN: This discussion, yes, there was a demand for open admissions That was the understanding—

CURVIN: Right.

COHEN: —when you talked to people, whether you talk to the students who were among the Conklin Hall action or to faculty, other people, yes, there was a demand for open admissions. And I’ve never been able to resolve that on my…. But that was the understanding, is what you’re saying.

CURVIN: Yes.

COHEN: Yes…well going…any other..

CURVIN: Peter was very forceful in this argument.

COHEN: Yes. Mm-hmm.
CURVIN: Because apparently he had as a high school student, although as you know he is exceedingly bright, he had apparently, you know, finished at the bottom of his class as a high school student. And you know how he got into Rutgers? Apparently he bullied his way into Malcolm Talbott’s office one day and finally got to talk to Talbott. You know he’s trying to get into colleges all over the place. And they would look at his high school record and say, you know, no way. And Malcolm Talbott apparently made it possible for him to do that, to get admitted. And, you know, he got into school and he did very well. He was in one of my classes. I tell you, he was really something.

COHEN: One of the classes that you taught?

CURVIN: When I was…One I taught, yes. And, you know, really sharp. And what he had, which many of the other students did not have, was this, you know, this really mature ability to be critical. And he could really take on anybody, you know, the professor, the other students, and so on. And he emerged really as a very important figure in the group. And so when he made this very impassioned plea that, you know, there are lots of people out there just like me. If you look at their high school records, they’re awful. He says, “But they’re really brilliant.” [Laughs] And all these students are, oh, yeah, gee, that sounds great.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: And I was saying, you know, nonsense. That’s absolutely nonsense. That’s not true.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

CURVIN: And I mean frankly I was arguing for some kind of middle point.

COHEN: Yes, yes, yes.

CURVIN: But I didn’t…. You know the group really was in control of itself. I didn’t tell this group what to do, despite what some of the other faculty members believed.

COHEN: I just want to say for then record then, this high school underachiever went on to a Harvard Ph.D.

CURVIN: A Harvard Ph.D.

COHEN: I forget, did he get it in economics or—

CURVIN: Economics.

COHEN: In economics.

CURVIN: In economics. That’s right. This Harvard underachiever got a Harvard Ph.D. and is now back at Rutgers, right?
COHEN: Yes, yes. He’s in the MPA program.

CURVIN: Teaching in the MPA program there on the campus, right. He was very good in economics, but he wasn’t very good at sociology. [Laughter]

COHEN: Oh, in the course that you taught. [Laughter] You caught him at the wrong time in his career. At the time, we were talking about your role then, what were you advising the students to—well, I guess, what questions, what advice were they looking for?

CURVIN: Well, my…. As an advisor, first of all you don’t live with the students, so you don’t see them much of the time that they’re thinking about the issues they’re trying to address or the things that they are attempting to do. And as an advisor, what I tried to do was try to help them formulate strategies to deal with the admissions issue: like suggesting that they prepare themselves to have discussions with the admissions department, to tell them how they could go about getting more information about what was happening. You know suggesting things like even that they could go around to the high schools in the local area and talk to high school counselors about Rutgers. And get some better impressions of what was going on. They had a lot of sources of information, including people within the admissions office that were clearly telling them a lot about what was going on.

And I frankly cannot say how factual it was, but there was at one time in which they were led to believe by someone in the admissions office that there were a whole stack of minority applications that had been, you know, sort of put on the side to be dealt with specially. But nobody ever got to them. So that the entire admissions year had gone by without getting to these applications that were supposed to be in some way a pool of students to actually upgrade or increase the numbers of minority on campus. But instead it was, you know, put to the side and never…kind of filed away and never gotten to. They believed that very strongly. And I heard much discussion about this and much concern about it. And the use of it as an example of the resistance on the part of the university to increasing the number of minorities on the campus. But I didn’t, you know, I didn’t…I wasn’t even privy to all of their meetings, even their strategy meetings. And in fact I can tell you very honestly that I did know they were going to take over Conklin Hall.

COHEN: You knew that.

CURVIN: I did know that.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: Yes. But I didn’t know, you know, all that much about the details and, you know, when it would be done and so on.

COHEN: To the extent that you know, what was the progression of events which led up to that decision to occupy Conklin Hall? What was breaking down, I guess, is what I’m asking.
CURVIN: Yes. I don’t know. Rather than breaking down, I think that there were, you know, there was a strong sense that things were not moving along some path of progression so that they would feel that they were accomplishing something.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

CURVIN: I would not, you know, ignore again though the rising sense of urgency in the society at large and how it was affecting students everyplace. I mean there was in fact a…you know there’s a very huge psychological component to these kinds of social movements. And they’re not just, you know, local in a sense. I mean people really do feel the pressure from events elsewhere as well. I mean this is not to suggest that there were not real issues on the Rutgers campus that they were dealing with. But when you add up all of the factors together, they felt that it was time to do something more drastic. They also felt that it was the only way in which they could get the attention of the university leadership in any effective way. They felt that they would continue to deal with the local players who seemed sympathetic to some extent, but not powerful enough to really make any substantial changes.

COHEN: What was your advice to the students when you found out that they were ready to take the action?

CURVIN: You mean did I tell them not to do it?

COHEN: Well, one way or another.

CURVIN: No, no. I just, you know, urged them to make sure that it was carefully planned and that nobody got hurt.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: And that in fact…. I don’t know if you know this, that they even were able to get from the city, through friends that worked in the city, the actual plans of the building.

COHEN: That I’ve heard.

CURVIN: Before they went in. So I mean they….

COHEN: From the city?

CURVIN: From the city.

COHEN: Oh, that’s how those plans were obtained. I see.

CURVIN: Yes. Right. They were obtained from the city government.

COHEN: I know someone I interviewed told me they had plans, I knew. But I somehow….. Well, whatever. I wasn’t sure what the source was.
CURVIN: No, they got them from somebody in the city.

COHEN: I see.

CURVIN: Who made them available to them.

COHEN: At that time, since you’re the advisor, the faculty advisor, were you acting in any liaison role with the faculty or the administration in any way? You were just dealing with advising students.

CURVIN: No, no. You know. And obviously when the takeover took place, members of the administration, including Malcolm, called and asked me my view. And Malcolm, when the students took over the hall, he had called, and I explained to them that I, first of all, I didn’t have, you know, control over the group. I was merely an advisor to them, and they had made this decision on their own. And others came to ask, you know, what is this about? And there were a lot of…you know academics are a very interesting lot, as you know. They are a lot of people who live in a very, very tiny world. And I can think of a couple of people there who were wonderful professors and just felt personally embarrassed and challenged by this event on the campus. And without mentioning their names, a couple of them came to me and said, “Tell me what this is about. What has happened here?” You know. And I, you know, as the advisor, I felt that I knew more and I could—and these were issues that I was concerned about myself—that I could say more to them about what was going on and try to have them at least understand in some reasonably balanced way what was going on. There were others, other members of the faculty, who really blamed me for the whole thing. One in particular who just saw me on the street one day and had a tantrum, you know, right on the street.

COHEN: Is that right?

CURVIN: Screaming, “Robert!” he called me. In fact he had been one of my professors. “Robert! Why did you let this happen!?” You know. And on and on. It was kind of interesting.

COHEN: Is that why you were identified in McCormick’s book as one of the influential, key people?

CURVIN: He mentions that, right.

COHEN: Are you being too modest in speaking now?

CURVIN: No.

COHEN: Or do you feel that your role is overestimated?

CURVIN: No. I think that my…. Well, to be perfectly honest, I could say that I think that I helped to give the students a sense of confidence and competence about how you involve yourself in social protest. And at the same time, I also feel, and I can say without reservation,
that they came to this idea themselves. As I said, I tried to urge them to do it in a way that was effective and certainly safe in terms of, you know, what would happen. I mean I know for a fact that this was not a group that would countenance anything about carrying weapons into a building or anything of that kind. There was none of that. They got very frightened at one point and were really quite concerned that they were going to be assaulted by these groups from the North Ward when Imperiali came down and started, you know, screaming and performing outside the building. But by and large they had accepted the notion, you know, without any great pain, that this was a nonviolent protest that was not in any way to injure even emotionally any of the employees of the university or any of the people that would be involved outside of themselves.

COHEN: Were you involved in the negotiations in any way between the administration and the students?

CURVIN: Not directly. And as I recall, you know, I mean I participated in some of the discussions with Talbott and Gross. I guess—was it Gross who was still there?

COHEN: He was the president.

CURVIN: He was the president then, yes. There were some meetings and whatnot. But eventually the students themselves actually engaged in a whole series of negotiations. Ivy Davis, Vickie, Joe Browne sat with Malcolm and Gross at one meeting. They met with Dungan.

COHEN: Were you there at the—

CURVIN: No, No.

COHEN: Were the students consulting with you at the time?

CURVIN: Occasionally.

COHEN: —While the negotiations were going on? How do you view, either then in or in retrospect, Talbott’s—Malcolm Talbott’s—role in the negotiations through that whole period?

CURVIN: Well, I tell you, knowing what I do about universities and also given what I feel about Malcolm personally, I really…I mean he was in a very, very tough position, you know. The faculty controls a university in a sense. And the position that he was in as kind of the overseer of the campus without having power and to some extent not having even sufficient respect on the part of the faculty to be a persuader in a situation like that made it very, very difficult. But Malcolm, in my mind, was extraordinary because he really, while carrying out this role as best he could, I think he also dealt as straightforwardly with the students as he could. I think as a manager, he probably…. Well, you know, it’s hard to make these judgments after a guy has gone and he doesn’t even have a chance to defend himself. But I think the one mistake he really made was when Joe Browne stood on top of his desk, and he didn’t say, at that point, you know, that that’s the limit. You can’t do that, you know. And I think he then became weak in the eyes of some of the students.
COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: That they could really push him. And you know, it’s a tough thing to say. I mean I’m also talking from the other side of the table in a way. But I was there when that happened, and I saw that. And, you know, I said to myself, that—and I even said to Joe after it happened—that, you know, I wouldn’t have done that because I think you really weakened the guy that you have to deal with. But you’ve weakened him in his ability to deal with other folks and made him less able in fact to help you. Malcolm was such a passionate and concerned human being, you know, that in a way he was really acting out of his concern for the larger society, for the community itself. He had just a remarkable passion about Newark and the city and its future and so on. And I talked to him, you know, quite often about city issues, problems. And I just had an enormous amount of respect for the guy. But, you know, Malcolm is one of many individuals who have been in that same position on college campuses.

COHEN: True.

CURVIN: Trying to deal with the failure of society and the expectations of students who come to realize that through their own efforts they can change things. And if you asked me the question, do I know of anybody on the campus there who could have done it better? I would say certainly not at that time, no. I think that, you know, given a…. [End of Tape #1]

COHEN: We’re back. We were talking about—

CURVIN: Yes.

COHEN: You had a job.

CURVIN: And, you know, the faculty wanted somebody who was going to be tough with the students and really stand up and defend the standards of the university and so on and so on. That kind of figure, I think, would have been a disaster for both the university and the city.

COHEN: If someone had taken a hard line?

CURVIN: Yes. And this was clearly an event that had swept up a large part of the community, too. It was not just a campus circumstance. There were lots of forces certainly within the Newark community, but even on a broader level in the state, you know, including I mean the legislature was watching. And the suburbanites were concerned. And it was a very, very dramatic and, for New Jersey, a very profound event.

COHEN: Yes, going back again to the episode with Joe Browne and Talbott. That was after, of course, the students evacuated Conklin Hall, right?

CURVIN: I believe it was. I’m not sure. It might have been—I’m not sure. I think it might have been…I’m trying to remember what happened.
COHEN: But the follow-up to that was the students, what was the—Well, what was the agreement, that you can recall, that got the students out of the building? What was the substance, what we’d call, the substance of the agreement? There is talk of the agreement. It’s mentioned in McCormick’s book, I’ve spoken to other people about a signed agreement. And yet, at least according to, I think, McCormick and others, there was no—

CURVIN: Can’t seem to find one. There was no agreement on the specifics. I mean basically it was an agreement that there would, as I recall, that there was an agreement that there would be a discussion about, you know, certain possibilities, to increase the enrollment of students, to take special efforts to recruit minority students, there would be funds made available for recruitment, special recruitment. But I don’t think there was anything like the final—the statement that Dungan actually ended up being a part of. That set up the university department.

COHEN: And the Urban University.

CURVIN: Right. I don’t think that was near concluded by then.

COHEN: So why did the students feel that they were—I guess they were passionate that they were deceived. That when they left the hall, that they were not really getting what they thought they’d be getting. And therefore went on to further action, I believe, on March 13th and the 14th. It was campus action causing—and the campus was shut down.

CURVIN: Right.

COHEN: Why—well, if you recall.

CURVIN: Yes. Well, there were general promises made.

COHEN: Yes. Was it solely because of the fact that it had to be put to the whole question of admissions? Put to the faculty?

CURVIN: And put to the faculty. And as I remember, didn’t the faculty, you know, basically said, no, we’re not going to do anything like that.

COHEN: Well, in my reading is that the faculty was…there was a question of the wording and whether the faculty would or the students would be either considered, students—I think in maybe the top 50 percent would be accepted or considered for admission.

CURVIN: Mm-hmm. Right.

COHEN: And there was a floor fight. Were you involved in that discussion in the faculty—

CURVIN: I was there.

COHEN: With the faculty about being considered or accepted. I think that was—
CURVIN: I think I was…

COHEN: —was the wording in my notes here. One of the demands… Well, we…. Let’s see. Oh, yes. These are both the faculty—the vote to consider accepting, you know, students, I believe, in the top 50 percent of their class, and the faculty vote. I remember the record was to consider. Do you have any recollection of that debate and about whether the students—

CURVIN: The students’ perception, as I recall, was that it was “accept.” Because as I said earlier, it was Peter who was arguing that, you know, the whole—anybody, anybody who graduated. And I was pushing for this 50 percent with the students. And so they thought that they had already compromised internally on this question by getting 50 percent.

COHEN: Accept, not consider.

CURVIN: Right. Accept, right. Accepted, yes.

COHEN: Okay. And then the faculty vote it became clear that they were not talking about accepting. They were talking about considering—

CURVIN: Considering, right.

COHEN: —accepting, which is a big difference.

CURVIN: Right, right.

COHEN: Big, big difference.

CURVIN: Right, right. Exactly.

COHEN: So that was the….

CURVIN: Because they had been considering all along. [Laughter] Yes.

COHEN: Now after that, were you in any way involved—I mean were you still advising the students? That was, I think, that vote was, the faculty, I think was March 5th of 6th. I think the 6th. And then the students, if you recall the decision, there was a call for—there was a demonstration and a call to shut down the campus following—the day after; the 14th was a Friday. Were you involved in any way in advising?

CURVIN: I don’t think so. No, no. Because at this point… I mean things were happening all over the place. I mean, you know, the students were….

COHEN: Students for elections of some sort.
CURVIN: The students were…I mean there were cabals of, the leadership cabal, and there were other cabals and Peter. And there were lots of people from outside in the community also, you know, trying to intervene, including obviously, Imperiali on one side and Baraka on the other. And students were meeting with their friends from city hall and people here. I mean it was just too much for any one person to keep up with. And again, I mean I didn’t feel that it was my job to take responsibility at directing this event. It was really in the hands of the students. And when I was asked advice, I, you know, tried to give it. But I think at that time that Vickie Donaldson was still working in my office. And so I would see her more frequently than I would see others. And we would spend time talking about what was going on.

COHEN: Yes. At that time, what was the sort of the tenor of discussions with Vickie Donaldson or Joe Browne or some of the other people in the organization?

CURVIN: Well, I really don’t have any precise recollection. I can only…and my own sense was that what had happened by this point was that there was a very critical division within the university: leadership, faculty, the administration, New Brunswick, Dungan’s office; and that much of the faculty really did not want to see any substantial change on the campus. And there were also some faculty members who were organizing among themselves, in fact, to support the students. As you might recall, some of the—a couple, people like, I don’t know, Janet Siskind [sp]. She still here?

COHEN: Yes, Janet is still in admissions.

CURVIN: You should talk to her.

COHEN: Oh, oh.

CURVIN: Janet was …

COHEN: I didn’t realize that she….

CURVIN: Was quite supportive.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

CURVIN: And Karen Spalding, and there were a few others.

COHEN: Was Daniel Lehrman involved?

CURVIN: Dan Lehrman was not involved. But he was one of the people who came to me during the protests, and basically sat down in my office and said, you know, “Tell me what’s going on here. I mean I’m just totally uninvolved, and I don’t know what the issues are and what the facts are.” He said, “I’d like to have your point of view on this.”

COHEN: This was during the occupation, when the building—?
CURVIN: This was during the occupation.

COHEN: During the occupation.

CURVIN: Yes. And before the faculty actually met to discuss it. And I think he was largely sympathetic to the students.

COHEN: Who were some of the other faculty people that you can recall who were—

CURVIN: Who were sympathetic?

COHEN: Who were sympathetic because my reading of the record, which is spotty, is that they were in a definite minority.

CURVIN: Oh, no question! No question about it. No question about it. No question about it. There was a guy in the Psychology Department—Grottberg?

COHEN: No, I…. The cognitive psychologist.

CURVIN: Yes, right. Gruber.

COHEN: Gruber. Yes, yes.

CURVIN: Is he still there?

COHEN: Howard Gruber. No, he retired I believe.

CURVIN: He retired?

COHEN: I think he may have retired to Switzerland or somewhere. [Laughter] Yes, Howard Gruber.

CURVIN: He was generally sympathetic.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Right.

CURVIN: That’s about all that I can think of. But I remember having some discussions with some. Then obviously they didn’t have much swing on the campus.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

CURVIN: But I talked to others, too, who were not—like Professor Carroll for example in the Chemistry Department.

COHEN: Ben?
CURVIN: Ben Carroll. He was very concerned and generally, you know, while he may not have agreed with all of the demands of the students, certainly accepted the notion that something needed to change. That the university needed to be more open; that there needed to be more awareness of what was going on in the community; and that…. I remember him making the statement that, you know, I’ve been here for 25 years with my eyes closed. Or something to that extent.

COHEN: Is that right?

CURVIN: Yes. And so I, you know, I had not at all paid any attention to what’s going on around just in our neighborhood around here in the community. Yes.

COHEN: How were people then, let’s say the students, responding to the charges on the part of the people who are unsympathetic to the question—charges of lowering standards, admissions standards and scholastic standards? How did they deal with that or how did they expect to deal with that if they weren’t exactly addressing it at the moment?

CURVIN: Well, I don’t think that anybody…. First of all, I think that many students held the view, the view that I have held for a long time, that this society has a way of making it possible for groups to get in when it wants them to get in. I mean we have all kinds of special routes for new immigrants, for foreign students, for veterans, for this or that. And so that the idea that we necessarily have to lower standards in order to admit minority students didn’t hold that much water.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: I think most students saw that as another argument of resistance, of indifference.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: At the same time, I think that most of the student leaders recognized that there needed to be additional preparation for many students who could eventually be able to do the work and compete at Rutgers. That given the social situations that many of these kids came out of and also the schools that they were attending, that if they had an opportunity to have a preparatory experience, that they would be able to compete. So I think they were certainly prepared to address those issues at some level. I don’t know. I mean the difference was, you know, how much risk could the university accept in this regard. And that’s what the debate seemed—was really about. And the faculty, you know, traditionally has always felt that minimize the risk, and that’s the best way to have a good university. Whereas the students felt that, particularly people like Peter, is that maximize the risk, and you have a more socially responsible university, which is the higher value for the student.

COHEN: We’re close to the windup—sort of a wrap-up. How would you assess the historical significance of the Conklin Hall action?
CURVIN: I think from my perspective, for Rutgers University, it marked a period of very, very profound change in terms of the university’s role and relationship with the larger society. And having been a student at the university, as I said earlier, from ’57 to ’60, I still think the remarkable thing about being a student at Newark-Rutgers at that time when I was there—and I lived in Newark also at the same time—when I was even walking from those factory buildings to factory buildings to class, you really had a sense that nothing else existed around you. I mean there was something about the whole mindset of the university in that era that made, you know—you didn’t talk about the city. You didn’t do anything in the city. You were literally kind of in another world when you were on that campus. I mean even walking across Broad Street, Broad Street seemed different than it really does as just a citizen of Newark. And the students were mainly from suburban communities. And the kind of course that I taught, which was called Race, Poverty, and Protest, and part of the responsibility or part of the course experience, was for students to actually in groups go out and do some project on the community. And something like that generally was never even thought of, even though I have to give credit to Inga Gamby for creating the RSVP project, which was a wonderful idea. But basically, you know, up until that point, it was a very, I think, insulated university.

COHEN: The RSVP program was volunteers?

CURVIN: Yes, Rutgers Student Volunteer Project. It was run out of the dean of students’ office.

COHEN: And what was the composition, the ethnic composition, of the students who were involved in that?

CURVIN: I don’t know. I really don’t know. I know that, in fact…well, I could give you any details.

COHEN: Just a couple more. Anything that we haven’t…well, anything that we touched on that you might want to go back to with a footnote?

CURVIN: Okay. Let me say something else about the meaning of Conklin Hall. I think that also had a very profound impact on the first personnel that were involved. I mean, you know, obviously the university is its personnel. But in some sense, if you take the individuals and think about them, I think for the faculty it had—it was a jar certainly to people like Bing Carroll and many others who were really highly talented professionals, but at the same time—and also very sensitive professionals who, you know, hadn’t thought about the larger issues in the society. And they lived in somewhat of a vacuum in a sense. So it was a wakeup call in a way for a lot of people like that. As the Newark riots were as well. But it was all part of a fabric of things that were occurring in that era. You can’t forget, though, the impact on the students themselves, who were participants in that event. And while there have been some bumps along the way, it would be interesting to take that group of students who actually participated in the planning, the actual takeover, the negotiations that followed, the implementation of the agreements, and I would bet you that they will come out very, very high in terms of accomplishment today in their careers.

COHEN: Yes, it’s a fact.
CURVIN: Yes.

COHEN: It’s a fact.

CURVIN: And, you know, it wasn’t just the education.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. I see what you’re saying.

CURVIN: That participation in a struggle of that kind had a very, very deep impact on those people. I mean I think that, you know, they’re different people. Whenever I, you know, for whatever circumstance get a chance to meet or to talk to them about anything, I know that I’m talking to someone who thinks and lives, views the world in a very special way.

COHEN: Yes.

CURVIN: And I mean Ivy and Vickie and Joe and Margo McGraw, you know, and just on and on down the line, wherever they are, these are basically people who are doers and with a considerable amount of commitment still to these issues.

COHEN: Anything we’ve talked about that you’d like to go back to and elaborate on, a footnote or….

CURVIN: Oh, well, let me think about it.

COHEN: Okay.

CURVIN: Likewise if you think of anything that we should go over again.

COHEN: Okay.

CURVIN: This has certainly forced me to think more about this period. It’s a long time ago.

COHEN: Yes, I know.

CURVIN: Gee, really a long time ago.

COHEN: Anything that we haven’t touched on, questions I haven’t asked that maybe I should have.

CURVIN: Okay. Well, let me think about it.

COHEN: Yes. Okay.

CURVIN: And if I, you know, something comes to me, I’ll give you a call. Or you give me a call if you’d like to go over more. We can do it again one day.
COHEN: Dr. Curvin, thank you very much. [End of Tape #2]

Edited by Gideon Thompson