

Daughter of a Segregationist

Written by Robert ID554

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The autobiography of Essie Mae Washington Williams begins "I always thought I had a fairly normal childhood, until I found out my parents weren't who I thought they were."

The daughter of longtime U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond and a 16-year-old black maid who worked at his family's home. is telling her side.

Williams, now 79, came forward a year ago, after Thurmond's death, with the secret she had held for more than 70 years. Her upcoming book, *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*, deals frankly with her relationship with the one-time segregationist who privately acknowledged her as his child but never spoke of her publicly.

Williams confronted Thurmond about his support of segregation, but watched with disappointment as his political star rose in the 1940s and '50s. "He became an outright racist, cloaked in the ancient doctrine of states' rights," she wrote.

The book, co-written with William Stadiem, is set to be released Jan. 27 by ReganBooks, a division of HarperCollins Publishers; reports [Columbia S.C. \(AP\)](#).

Williams was raised in Coatesville, Pa., by Mary and John Washington. Her world changed at age 13 when Mary Washington's sister, Carrie Butler, told Essie Mae that she was her biological mother.

A few years later, when she returned to Edgefield for a funeral, Butler took her to a local law office where she first met Thurmond.

"He never called my mother by her first name. He didn't verbally acknowledge that I was his child. He didn't ask when I was leaving and didn't invite me to come back. It was like an audience with an important man, a job interview, but not a reunion with a father," Williams wrote.

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It was the first of many visits between Thurmond and Williams. He provided for her financially, but their meetings were always formal events where Thurmond — a health fanatic — asked more questions about her exercise and eating habits than her personal life.

During one visit around 1946, Thurmond offered to pay her tuition at an all-black college in Orangeburg, now known as South Carolina State University.

Moving to the school in the South meant she had to adapt to a segregated culture. The black students rarely left campus and, when they did, they were forced to sit in the backs of buses and visit only certain restaurants and shops.

Many of her classmates came from prosperous black families. While they talked about their fathers' jobs, Williams held back.

"With all the family comparisons, I was tempted to brag about my father. ... But the temptation quickly passed. I wasn't crazy. And I was very grateful to my father for making it possible to come here to State. I couldn't afford to lose the opportunity in front of me. For me, it was a state of grace."

During her college years, Thurmond visited Williams a couple times, meeting privately in the school president's office.

"Our surface dealings were precisely that, all superficial and completely unemotional, despite my inner turmoil."

Williams watched her father's career from afar. She attended his gubernatorial inauguration in January 1947 with her classmates. She watched her father and his family.

"This was my family, but I didn't know them and they didn't know me. In time, in time, I prayed to myself. If my father could change this state, with its Confederate flags flying and its

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Confederate soldiers standing vigil atop their obelisks, I had reason to hope he could change his own house," she writes.

Thurmond said segregation laws were needed to protect the purity of the races.

"I wasn't sure if this was my father talking or the ghost of Adolf Hitler," she wrote.

When Thurmond ran for president as the State's Rights Party candidate during the 1948 election, he said: "All the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the army cannot force the Negro race into our theaters, our swimming pools, our schools, our churches, our homes."

Nearly a decade later, he set the Senate record for filibustering when he spoke against a bill to end discrimination in housing.

On one visit, Williams asked Thurmond how he could say such things about blacks. She said blacks were treated unfairly, but he defended it as the culture and custom of the South.

Over the decades, Williams tried to reconcile the fiery politician with the man who treated her kindly, providing money for her and her family.

"It's not that Strom Thurmond ever swore me to secrecy. He never swore me to anything. He trusted me, and I respected him, and we loved each other in our deeply repressed ways, and that was our social contract," she wrote.

Thurmond eventually softened his political stance and renounced racism.

Williams, who taught in public schools for 27 schools, said Thurmond's death in 2003 at age 100 left her unsettled. Her own daughter encouraged her to make her story public, and

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Thurmond's family soon acknowledged her heritage.

"In a way, my life began at 78, at least my life as who I really was, without the subterfuges of the previous 65 years," Williams wrote. "I may have called it "closure," but it was much more like an opening, a very grand opening."