

1. How are opening scenes reminiscent of Reconstruction after the Civil War?
2. What kind of challenges stand in the way of black men rising to their full potential in the film?
3. How was the black father-son relationship impacted by white racism or white culture?
4. What are some of the major Civil Rights chapters depicted in the film? Are they helpful to the plot?
5. Why are many of the presidents limited in what they can do for civil rights?
6. How do Louis’s practices in the Civil Rights Movement dramatically evolve over the years?
7. Which presidential depiction in the film intrigued you the most and why?
8. Why are protestors often persecuted for their actions?
9. Analyze the Reagan State Dinner scene near the end. When have you ever felt like an outsider?
10. The film covers a broad range of history. In your view, what is the next chapter for civil rights?


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Accompanying primary source:

**A butler well served by this election**

By Wil Haygood – *Washington Post*

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This story is one of nine that has been republished to commemorate the 50th anniversary of The Washington Post’s Style section. It’s tempting to call this a fanfare for the common man, but Wil Haygood knows that timpani is not nearly as effective as harmony between horns. With quietness and clarity, amid the hum of political climax, he slipped a humble man into the official record, beside an American president.

For more than three decades Eugene Allen worked in the White House, a black man unknown to the headlines. During some of those years, harsh segregation laws lay upon the land.

He trekked home every night, his wife, Helene, keeping him out of her kitchen. At the White House, he worked closer to the dirty dishes than to the large desk in the Oval Office. Helene didn't care; she just beamed with pride.

President Truman called him Gene. President Ford liked to talk golf with him.

He saw eight presidential administrations come and go, often working six days a week. “I never missed a day of work,” Allen says. His is a story from the back pages of history. A figure in the tiniest of print. The man in the kitchen. He was there while America's racial history was being remade: Brown v. Board of Education, the Little Rock school crisis, the 1963 March on Washington, the cities burning, the civil rights bills, the assassinations.

When he started at the White House in 1952, he couldn't even use the public restrooms when he ventured back to his native Virginia. “We had never had anything,” Allen, 89, recalls of black America at the time. “I was always hoping things would get better.” In its long history, the White House — just note the name — has had a complex and vexing relationship with black Americans. “The history is not so uneven at the lower level, in the kitchen,” says Ted Sorensen, who served as counselor to President Kennedy.” In the kitchen, the folks have always been black. Even the folks at the door — black.”

Sorensen tried to address the matter of blacks in the White House. But in the end, there was only one black man who stayed on the executive staff at the Kennedy White House past the first year. “There just weren't as many blacks as there should have been,” says Sorensen. “Sensitivities weren't what they should have been, or could have been.”

In 1866 the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, sensing an opening to advocate for black voting rights, made a White House visit to lobby President Andrew Johnson. Johnson refused to engage in a struggle for black voting rights. Douglass was back at the White House in 1877. But no one wished to discuss his political sentiments: President Rutherford Hayes had engaged the great man — it was a time of high minstrelsy across the nation — to serve as a master of ceremonies for an evening of entertainment.

In the fall of 1901, another famous black American came to the door. President Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington, head of the Tuskegee Institute, to meet with him at the White House. Roosevelt was careful not to announce the invitation, fearing a backlash, especially from Southerners. But news of the visit leaked quickly enough and the uproar was swift and noisy. In an editorial, the Memphis Scimitar would write in the ugly language of the times: “It is only recently that President Roosevelt boasted that his mother was a Southern woman, and that he is half Southern by reason of that fact. By inviting a nigger to his table he pays his mother small duty.”

Fifty years later, invitations to the White House were still fraught with racial subtext. When the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow pianist Hazel Scott to perform at Constitution Hall because of her race, many letters poured into the White House decrying the DAR's position. First lady Bess Truman was a member of the organization, but she made no effort to get the DAR to alter its policy. Scott's husband, Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell, subsequently referred to Bess Truman as “the last lady of the land.” The words outraged President Truman, who vowed to aides he would find some way to punish Powell and barred the fellow Democrat from setting foot inside the Truman White House.

The first black to hold a policy or political position in the White House was E. Frederick Morrow, a former public relations executive with CBS. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's presidential campaign operatives were so impressed with Morrow's diligent work during the 1952 campaign that they promised him a White House executive job if Ike were elected. Ike won, but Morrow ended up being placed at the Department of Commerce. He felt slighted and appealed to Republican friends in New York to force the White House to make good on its promise.

The phone finally rang in 1955 and Morrow was named administrative officer for special projects. He had hoped the title would give him wide responsibilities inside the White House, but found himself dealing, for the most part, with issues related to the Brown desegregation ruling, the Rosa Parks-led bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., and the 1957 Little Rock school crisis.

“He was a man of great dignity,” says Stephen Hess, senior fellow emeritus at the Brookings Institution, who worked as a speechwriter for Eisenhower. Morrow was in a lonely position, but “he did not complain,” says Hess. “That wasn't Fred Morrow.”

When Morrow left his White House position, he imagined there'd be corporate job offers. There were not. “Only thing he was offered were jobs related to the black community,” says Hess. Nonetheless, “after Morrow, it was appropriate to have a black person on the staff of the White House.”

Before he landed his job at the White House, Gene Allen worked as a waiter at the Homestead resort in Hot Springs, Va., and then at a country club in Washington. He and wife Helene, 86, are sitting in the living room of their home off Georgia Avenue NW. A cane rests across her lap. Her voice is musical, in a Lena Horne kind of way. She calls him “honey.” They met in Washington at a birthday party in 1942. He was too shy to ask for her number, so she tracked his down. They married a year later.

In 1952, a lady told him of a job opening in the White House. “I wasn't even looking for a job,” he says. “I was happy where I was working, but she told me to go on over there and meet with a guy by the name of Alonzo Fields.”

Fields was a maitre d’, and he immediately liked Allen. Allen was offered a job as a “pantry man.” He washed dishes, stocked cabinets and shined silverware. He started at $2,400 a year. There was, in time, a promotion to butler. “Shook the hand of all the presidents I ever worked for,” he says.

“I was there, honey,” Helene reminds. “In the back, maybe. But I shook their hands, too.” She's referring to White House holiday parties, Easter egg hunts. They have one son, Charles. He works as an investigator with the State Department.

“President Ford's birthday and my birthday were on the same day,” he says. “He'd have a birthday party at the White House. Everybody would be there. And Mrs. Ford would say, 'It's Gene's birthday, too!’” And so they'd sing a little ditty to the butler. And the butler, who wore a tuxedo to work every day, would blush.

“Jack Kennedy was very nice,” he goes on. “And so was Mrs. Kennedy.”

“Hmm-mmm,” she says, rocking.

He was in the White House kitchen the day JFK was slain. He got a personal invitation to the funeral. But he volunteered for other duty: “Somebody had to be at the White House to serve everyone after they came from the funeral.”

The whole family of President Jimmy Carter made her chuckle: “They were country. And I'm talking Lillian and Rosalynn both.” It comes out sounding like the highest compliment.

First lady Nancy Reagan came looking for him in the kitchen one day. She wanted to remind him about the upcoming dinner for West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. He told her he was well ahead in the planning and had already picked out the china. But she told him he would not be working that night.

“She said, 'You and Helene are coming to the state dinner as guests of President Reagan and myself.' I'm telling you! I believe I'm the only butler to get invited to a state dinner.”

Husbands and wives don't sit together at these events, and Helene was nervous about trying to make small talk with world leaders. “And my son says, 'Mama, just talk about your high school. They won't know the difference.'

“The senators were all talking about the colleges and universities that they went to,” she says.” I was doing as much talking as they were.

“Had champagne that night,” she says, looking over at her husband.

He just grins: He was the man who stacked the champagne at the White House.

President Kennedy, who succeeded Eisenhower, started with two blacks, Frank Reeves and Andrew Hatcher, in executive positions on his White House staff. Only Hatcher, a deputy press secretary, remained after six months. Reeves, who focused on civil rights matters, left in a political reshuffling.

The issue of race bedeviled this White House, even amid good intentions. In February 1963, Kennedy invited 800 blacks to the White House to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Louis Martin, a Democratic operative who helped plan the function, had placed the names of entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. and his wife, May Britt, on the guest list. The White House scratched it off and Martin would put it back on. According to Martin, Kennedy was aghast when he saw the black and white couple stroll into the White House. His face reddened and he instructed photographers that no pictures of the interracial couple would be taken.

But Sammy Davis Jr. was not finished with 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. He got himself invited to the Nixon White House to meet with the president and talk about Vietnam and business opportunities for blacks. He even slept in the Lincoln Bedroom once. When Davis sang at the 1972 Republican convention in Miami, he famously wrapped his arms around Nixon at a youth rally there, becoming forever identified with a White House that many blacks found hostile.

Lyndon Johnson devoted considerable energy and determination to civil rights legislation, even appointing the first black to the Supreme Court. But it did not translate to any appreciable number of blacks working on his staff. Clifford Alexander says he was the sole black in Johnson's White House, serving first as a National Security Council officer, then as associate White House counsel.

“We were fighting for something quite new,” says Alexander. “You knew how much your job meant. And you knew President Johnson was fighting on your behalf.” As a young man growing up in Harlem, Alexander had heard about Morrow. Mothers and fathers pointed to him as a grand success story. “Fred was a lovely man,” says Alexander. “But they did not pay any attention to him in the Eisenhower White House.”

Colin Powell would become the highest-ranking black of any White House to that point when he was named President Reagan's national security adviser in 1987. Condoleezza Rice would have that same position under President George W. Bush.

The butler remembers seeing both Powell and Rice in the Oval Office. He was serving refreshments. He couldn't help notice that blacks were moving closer to the center of power, closer than he could ever have dreamed. He'd tell Helene how proud it made him feel.

Gene Allen was promoted to maitre d' in 1980. He left the White House in 1986, after 34 years. President Reagan wrote him a sweet note. Nancy Reagan hugged him, tight.

Interviewed at their home last week, Gene and Helene speculated about what it would mean if a black man were actually elected president.

“Just imagine,” she said.

“It'd be really something,” he said.

“We're pretty much past the going-out stage,” she said. “But you never know. If he gets in there, it'd sure be nice to go over there again.”

They've got pictures of President and Mrs. Reagan in the living room. On a wall in the basement, they've got pictures of every president Gene ever served. There's a painting President Eisenhower gave him and a picture of President Ford opening birthday gifts, Gene hovering nearby.

They talked about praying to help Barack Obama get to the White House. They'd go vote together. She'd lean on her cane with one hand, and on him with the other, while walking down to the precinct. And she'd get supper going afterward. They'd gone over their Election Day plans more than once.

“Imagine,” she said.

“That's right,” he said.

On Monday Helene had a doctor's appointment. Gene woke and nudged her once, then again. He shuffled around to her side of the bed. He nudged Helene again. He was all alone.

“I woke up and my wife didn't,” he said later.

Some friends and family members rushed over. He wanted to make coffee. They had to shoo the butler out of the kitchen. The lady whom he married 65 years ago will be buried today.

The butler cast his vote for Obama on Tuesday. He so missed telling his Helene about the black man bound for the Oval Office.