

- Anthony Comegna: [00:19](#) Welcome back to another week of Ideas In Progress here with the Institute for Humane Studies. We picked back up with Dr. David Beito shifting this week from FDRs New Deal to a fascinating and challenging figure from the civil rights era, the enigmatic and larger than life T.R.M. Howard.
- All right. So David, welcome back. I want to start out this week by saying that I think it's fair to say that you and Linda Royster Beito are by yourselves responsible for the vast majority of people today who've heard anything at all about T.R.M. Howard. I mean, I know I, for example, would not have heard about him until your book came out, even though he seems like such a fascinating and important figure. I just had never come across his name before, and after having read your book, I'm a little surprised by that because he certainly had a life that was larger than the normal one.
- David Beito: [01:18](#) Well, we're still surprised and we're still surprised by... Even though we've been happy with the reception to our book, we'd like a lot more people to take an interest in this remarkable man and really would like a lot more libertarians and maybe libertarian-ish conservatives to take an interest in him because this is someone that it's almost like a Randian hero in some ways. And he was not on the periphery of the civil rights movement. He was not a dissident in the movement in the sense of being some sort of outlier. He was a leader. He was a key leader in the years before Martin Luther King. He was out there on the front lines doing things in very hostile environment that were really quite remarkable. So that is one thing I am a little bit surprised on and a little bit still hopeful that more libertarians and more of course people on the left as well, but more people that sort of agree with us will see what this guy has to offer. And what his importance in the whole history of civil rights because we often tend to see ourselves, I guess as, I don't know, that that's not... That's not really something that we're connected to I guess. Like the left is connected to the history of civil rights.
- Anthony Comegna: [02:56](#) You know what, speaking of that, which I think is a tragedy by the way. I mean, oh God, all the time I've tried to spend arguing that classical liberal scholars should be more connected to the history of race. I mean, good Lord, the state created this phenomenon in the first place right here in Virginia. So it shouldn't be that hard for us to deal with the history of race and racism and to make serious interventions there into that literature. And I'm wondering what was it like writing a book that you must have known would sort of be the definitive

biography of T.R.M. Howard, at least for the time being? What was that experience like?

David Beito:

[03:42](#)

It was something unplanned. I originally wrote a book about mutual aid from mutual aid to the welfare state, which discussed the role of fraternal societies as providers of social welfare. And we had a chapter on a black hospital. It was run by fraternal group and it was all black town in Mississippi. And my wife and I, we went there, and we were sort of doing some... She was helping me in the research and then we both came across this guy, someone who was the local town father said, "Someone should write about this guy." And we said, "Ah yeah, whatever." I wasn't thinking writing a biography, my wife wasn't thinking of writing a biography. But once we looked into this guy just a little bit, we said, "My God, this guy's incredible." And drop everything, write a biography of them.

And I've never written a biography before. We had not. And so it was a different experience. It was quite enjoyable writing a biography because you're kind of controlled by this person's life. And so we would try to track him every year. What was he doing at this point and who was he meeting? And what efforts was he making? And how was it all interconnected? A lot different than writing a typical history book, but fortunately, Howard, was all over the place. He was all over black newspapers. There was an FBI file on him. He always stood out everywhere he went.

So we found plenty of material and we found, of course, since he died in '76, we found quite a few people that knew him. Hundreds of interviews of people that knew him. So we were able to tell the story. We started on now a lot of those people are gone, and we would have lost a lot of the more colorful aspects of the book I think. But we were lucky. Our timing was still good enough that we were able to tell his story, and we're pretty proud of the way it turned out. And of any book I've ever done, probably ever will do, this is the book that's my favorite and that I'm most enthused about. And I think is the most in some ways. If only other people agreed.

Anthony Comegna:

[06:02](#)

Well let's dig into that a little bit because I'll say that three particular strands of Howard's life really stood out to me, and I wondered if I could get your commentary on sort of each one in turn. First was his role in the civil rights movement of course. And as you said, even though he's overshadowed by a lot of other figures, he really was central. I mean, you almost want to call them sort of a Forrest Gump like figure in the civil rights

movement. Except he wasn't tangential to this at all. He didn't just happen to be there at these big important moments. He really was central to a lot of aspects of the civil rights movement.

David Beito:

[06:37](#)

Yeah. He was a leader, and he built a mass movement in the most hostile part of the United States in terms of civil rights, which is the Mississippi Delta. I think that's probably a fair statement or close to it. There are whole counties in the Delta that did not ever have black majorities and not a single black voter. So this is a place where when you read about this to the civil rights movement, a lot of the killings, a lot of the massacres, a lot of the violence, this is where a lot of that was centered.

Here this guy comes in the 1940s. He's a chief surgeon of this fraternal hospital. Though he's very much connected to this tradition of self-help and mutual aid, and he proceeds to become very wealthy. One of the largest black land owners in Mississippi, over a thousand acres, owns a construction firm, sets up a zoo. He's a real showman, a community builder. He's kind of the P.T. Barnum of civil rights. Has the first swimming pool for blacks. He just comes into this all black town in the Delta that has its own interesting history called Mound Bayou and it just remakes the whole place. And then he organizes a movement to boycott service stations that refuse to provide restrooms for blacks.

I mean, forget about Jim Crow restrooms or segregated restrooms, they just didn't have them in a lot of them gas stations in the Mississippi Delta, and he sets us up in 1950. And people put bumper stickers on their cars and say, "Don't buy gas where you can't use the restroom." 10,000 of these, at least. And it's a successful boycott partly because the national chains get involved and put pressure, but also just because African-Americans just they'll pull in. And I talked to one guy and he says, "Yeah, the guy put the gas a nozzle in my car. And I was asking him, 'Do you have a restroom for colored people here?' The guy said no. And I said take that out, take that out." And he drove off. Those kinds of things happened all the time. And most African Americans have cars at this time. So they go elsewhere, including the gas stations owned by African Americans.

So it's a very successful boycott. He builds this movement called The Regional Council of Negro Leadership. They have annual rallies where they get 10,000 people out in the middle of the

rural Delta with national speakers such as Thurgood Marshall, entertainers such as Mahalia Jackson. It's like a festival and he's doing all of this.

And then most people have at least heard of the Emmett Till case. 14 year old black boy who's visiting the Mississippi Delta is brutally killed, disappears. He's found floating in the Tallahatchie River, badly mangled. Howard is on this case even before they find the body. Emmett Till's mother comes to Mississippi to stay with him during the trial. He provides her an armed escort to the trial. And then he's out at midnight, no two in the morning with a whole group, an interracial group of people leading a search to try to find witnesses and evidence to hopefully convict these two white brothers who were accused were guilty of the crime. But they ended up being acquitted and Howard predicted that would happen. But he was desperately trying to prove their guilt. And he found plenty of proof, but the jury was not going to do anything.

So these are the kinds of things he's doing, but he is Mr. Civil Rights for Mississippi and he's a national figure. All the black newspapers, New York, Los Angeles, everywhere, they're putting him on the front page. And he's involved in the Montgomery bus boycott in an interesting way, which I could tell you about.

Anthony Comegna: [11:01](#) Go ahead. Please.

David Beito: [11:02](#) Well-

Anthony Comegna: [11:02](#) Yeah, please.

David Beito: [11:03](#) Only three days before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, Howard gives a speech in Montgomery on the Emmett Till case and he gets a sell out crowd at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. His host is an unknown nationally unknown minister, Martin Luther King Jr., And Rosa Parks is in the audience. It's a big event. It's on the front page of the local black newspapers. It's still on the newsstands three days later when Rosa Parks makes her decision to refuse to give up her seat. She said later she was asked, "Well who were you thinking of?" She said, "I was thinking of Emmett Till." And she also noted in an interview that she did that that was the first big event that they had had in Montgomery about the Till case.

Howard was a real passionate speaker. Very effective. So did that prod her? It's entirely possible. It's entirely reasonable. Of

course, we don't have proof, but he's right there. So in some ways is the changing of the guard because in the period after that, King rises up to become the best known national civil rights figure. And Howard is still important, but this is one of the reasons I think people might like him. He doesn't define himself as a civil rights leader. He is the leading black doctor in the country, a leading businessman, a big game hunter. He's leading entertainer, raconteur. He's all these things and he's always moving on.

So he moves onto a new project. You asked him about Emmett Till 10 years after this, he'd say, "Oh yeah. Dude, you want to hear my new thing that I'm doing?" Always moving on to new projects. That's why he's difficult. It was hard for us to find a title. What is he? He's everything, and that's attractive about him. He's always looking forward, always planning and always coming up with a new project.

Often a new way to make money. But he's into community building. He's into improvement. He combines those two. He's not the Gandhian figure. He likes to have a good life. He likes to head down the highway in his very expensive Buick in the Mississippi Delta and change his clothes several times a day, the most expensive suits and have fun. And live the high life. So he's the civil rights leader in the fast lane. But he doesn't fit our stereotype, at least I guess we hear things about King. But that wasn't his persona. Howard's persona is, "I'm a guy here to have a good time and go to the races and bet on horses and dress well and be this kind of larger than life figure."

Anthony Comegna: [14:16](#)

But now, of course, a black man in Mississippi who wants to live larger than life like that and put sort of his wealth and success on display is really taking his life in his hands, especially if he's a civil rights leader. And that brings me directly to the second strand that I was really interested in, which is his support of an individual right to bear arms in self defense. And I mean, this is not Howard forming up as part of some well regulated militia, right? This is an individual right to bear arms that he's particularly involved with supporting. And I wonder if you could comment on that.

David Beito: [14:57](#)

Well, in some ways he's involved in... [inaudible 00:15:00] would characterize him because he is... Howard is a Kentucky boy who hunted very poor. Unlike almost all of these major leaders, he is born in true poverty and the family literally just had their ration bullets. Here's the number of bullets you get to the seven year old, eight year old boy or whatever he was. Very

young. Go get some food for our family. That was how poor. So he grew up hunting. He knew guns. He was comfortable with them. He had an arsenal, including a Thompson submachine gun, which you would show off to people and pistols, guns. But you also had gun control in Mississippi.

You would often think the South, oh gun control? But they were a pioneer. In Mississippi, you could not get a gun if you were a black person for what we call concealed carry or carry, even carry a hand gun in your car. You couldn't get it. You'd be turned down because the local sheriffs were involved. So if you were a black man and were found with a gun, a handgun in your car, you'd have to pay \$100 or whatever. It's just a lot of money in 1950s for carrying a first offense, I guess. Carrying a weapon without a permit.

But Howard had a hiding place in his car. He had a secret compartment. So the police would pull him over, put the gun in a secret compartment and they never caught him with a gun. But he was heavily armed. But the people around them at these rallies. He'd have these rallies of 10,000 people, no violence. Why? Because people there were heavily armed. This is the gun culture, black gun culture, rural black gun culture. And they had guns everywhere, and they had a very efficient security system. So if someone were to come in close at one of those rallies and try to attack anybody, they would have gotten a fuselage of response. So he's very much into arm self defense. It's sort of part of their program. It's essential to their program. It prevents a lot of violence.

Certainly he's in a violent place, but I'll have to say he's been economically successful. A lot of the whites, at least in the early years, were kind of afraid of him because the story went around that Howard didn't like what you were doing, strange things could start happening. Some of the workers could on the plantation, could break machines, could do other things like that. It almost seen as a kind of mystical power. And at least in the early years if things like hit a bank once, women were referred to by their first names, which is typical in the Delta. The bank teller wouldn't say Mrs. Smith maybe. Howard heard about this and had a large account in that bank and said, "I'll pull it out, and I'll tell other people to pull it out." The bank president called him up and apologized, and that practice ended. So he doesn't have any economic clout. He buys a lot of stuff from whites. He buys their tractors, sells his crops to them. So under the radar, he has a certain amount of economic clout.

- Anthony Comegna: [18:42](#) The final strand that I wanted to talk about here is Howard's career as an illegal abortionist.
- David Beito: [18:48](#) Oh, you asked the question. Yes, yes. That's why I won't get on the Glenn Beck Show. I mean, maybe there's other reasons, but Beck likes to talk about it.
- Anthony Comegna: [18:58](#) I'm sure.
- David Beito: [18:58](#) I try, but yeah. They see that and they go, "No, we can't have this guy on." Sad that people have that attitude. Right? They can't take something they like and overlook something they don't like. But anyway, go ahead.
- Anthony Comegna: [19:11](#) No, I think it's definitely part of the tapestry that makes this guy so compelling a figure because he does support a woman's access to abortion because he sees the impact that early in life parenthood has on black women especially, but the black family in general. And he sees it as sort of a poverty trap.
- David Beito: [19:36](#) He does. We're not too sure how this all happened. He's a real independent figure. He comes from a very conservative religious background, Seventh-day Adventists, who are not anti-abortion partly because their leader... Oh, what is her name? Ellen G. White never said anything about abortion, but somebody told me if she had something, she would have been against it. But they got a little leeway on that, but he comes from this kind of background. But then he starts performing abortions on the side, and he's doing them initially for white women. So he does this in Mississippi. Daughters of a white elite. And my God, he would have known a lot of... He would have had a lot of blackmailable information if you wanted to use it. And it's never used against him.
- He would do these abortions and he's attacked viciously in the press for his civil rights work and for other things. But they never touched this. But it was well known that this is what he's doing. It's a sideline now.
- Now when he comes to Chicago, and he comes to Chicago in '56, he's doing it illegally. And they have a whole system. It's illegal in Illinois till the '70s. So he's doing it illegally, and he's arrested a couple of times. He hires very good lawyers. And one time this lawyer, who by the way was the first choice of the Jack Ruby's family to represent Jack Ruby. He turns the case down, but he's very nationally known lawyer named Bellows. Bellows says the police had sent a police woman in to "have an

abortion," and she was wired and to catch him in the act of doing the abortion. And they did. And he offered a bribe of like \$10,000 the police officer, who I interviewed. Who by the way liked Howard. He said, "I turned down the bribe, but he offered me..." He's kept upping the number, and then they Bellows uses this really novel defense. He says, "Well," she asked her, the policewoman, "Were you pregnant?" And she says, "Well, well no." He said, "Therefore no crime occurred." She wasn't pregnant. Can't have an attempted abortion on someone that's not pregnant. They never get him. And then when abortion is legalized, Roe V Wade, he's ready to go the first day and sets up a major medical center on the South side. It gets a lot of its income from abortion.

Now, whatever you think of Howard on that issue, he is very open about his views on this and he is going against the strain of anti-abortion thought among blacks. People like Dick Gregory, people like Elijah Muhammad. There is a lot of African Americans who are making this sort of argument that this is genocide. And Howard is making an argument defending a woman's right to choose. But he's making utilitarian arguments, like you've mentioned. He says, "Look in the Mississippi Delta, you don't have anything to do. So people have sex." They do that for recreation. There's nothing else to do. And so you have a lot of babies being born that aren't going to be taken care of, et cetera, et cetera. So he's trying to open this up, and he definitely is identified with that position.

And he's shown on the cover of Jet Magazine performing an abortion. And this is how much he's involved in that issue. And it is a shame that a lot of conservatives who I think would almost see him as a folk hero, not all of them, but a lot of them I think are put off by that because this would seem to be somebody that conservatives would want to embrace. But it's the red team mentality. They can't say, "Well gee, I don't agree with him on that, but..."

The same thing with the left I think to some degree too, who are put off by his materialism, by the fact that he was a Republican, put off by his anti-communism and he was very anticommunist, and that kind of thing. So both sides have something to like but something about Howard that's going to get them upset. And that's unfortunate that people can't put that aside, but they can't a lot of them.

Anthony Comegna: [24:25](#)

Yeah. I mean, I found this the most interesting part of the whole book, this discussion of abortion because it just shows how

widespread his different contributions were and how all the different intersections of parts of his personality amounted to a really interesting body of work.

David Beito: [24:43](#) Well, on abortion... Oh, go ahead.

Anthony Comegna: [24:46](#) No, I was just going to say, of course the most interesting figures from history are complicated, and Howard is certainly complicated. And he defies sort of easy categorization today, and he had a lot of flaws and drawbacks as well. I know you had something to add there, but I think we would be remissed too if we didn't mention the kinds of hardships that he did inflict on those around him while he was so wrapped up in the things we've been discussing.

David Beito: [25:16](#) Well Howard, of course, we're now finding things out about. I'm not trying to diminish Martin Luther King, but we're finding out things about a lot of people. So I think we have to keep that in perspective, but we did a works in all of Crow. This is no, Hey Geographic book. And one of the things we saw about Howard was that he was married to the same woman for decades, 1935 until his death. Very interesting. Very helpful to him. Very different than him. Very different background. But he was having an affair after affair after affair, but not just affair, I guess he... I don't know if he understood the principles of birth control. He probably didn't matter to him. He had, I lost count. Seven, eight, what they call maybe more than that. I haven't looked, reviewed it in awhile, but what they call in the South outside children, out of wedlock children. It was just an incredible number.

Now Howard did not deny this and was involved in the lives of these children and employed them in many cases and helped them to go to college. But again, you can rationalize that to only a limited degree because these children are living with their mothers and have in many ways deprived background because there's only so much you can do, and they're all over the place. So he has these children outside of marriage. I would say that's big thing about Howard. He's just sort of Lord of the Manor I think, and it goes to his head. Running this big plantation and all of this stuff. And, of course, in his job he wasn't a very great a looking guy, but he had all these opportunities and he used the opportunities.

Anthony Comegna: [27:24](#) Any last words for us on T.R.M. Howard?

David Beito:

[27:27](#)

Well we're hawking around a movie script. So we've got a few bites. But if anybody has any contacts, let us know because we think that the guy would really make for an incredible film and would be as an actor, my God, I think a comedian would be good in this part. Maybe someone like a Dave Chappelle or Eddie Murphy because Howard does have that kind of, as I said, kind of that quality of we're going to put on a show, right? It's going to be big. It's going to be really big. And someone said once, he could talk his shoes off in a snow storm.

It's just as a personality alone I think there's just so much about him. But he is a byproduct as well. And this is something else that I think classical liberals should take pride in of a earlier tradition of self-help, of entrepreneurship, of mutual aid. He comes out of that tradition. He builds on that tradition. He's able to build a civil rights movement basically from infrastructure created by his fraternal society that he ran, which has lodges throughout Mississippi. Well, he's able to use that and those are people that are trained in how to run a meeting and then Robert's rules of order and in organizing it.

He is a fan of Booker T. Washington. He calls Washington a towering genius, and you can understand why because that was Washington's strategy. You build up the economic infrastructure and then you're going to have an infrastructure for civil rights. He lives that out and I think he helps redeem. There's plenty of examples, but Washington was right. As a longterm strategy, it paid off. And the modern civil rights movement really grows out of that infrastructure that's created by Washington's efforts and to a great extent. Obviously a lot of people are doing that, but Washington is encouraging that certainly.

Anthony Comegna:

[29:43](#)

What a fascinating guy. T.R.M. Howard has got to be one of my favorite new people. Not that he is new, of course, but I simply never heard of him before I read the Beito's book. But obscurity aside, Howard was hugely important and still cuts quite the figure. His strengths and weaknesses both point the way forward, and from my part, I just want to note this is the kind of work I think we should be doing more of. Here it is right here. Students take heed. There's always more ground to cover and new ideas to put into progress.