Oral History: BROOKS OHBR012B

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by
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Brooks: So I finally got an assurance, I thought, from the chairman of the economic advisors that neither he or the president would issue any more violent statements about the shortage of meat and create this artificial shortage which we had. After I left President [Gerald Rudolph] Ford's [Jr.] office over at the White House and went on over to the Senate—I went by to speak to Senator [Herman Eugene] Talmadge, who was chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, to report to him what I'd done over at the White House and what had taken place.

While I was in his office Betty [Leila Elizabeth] Talmadge, his wife, came in, and I said to Betty, "I am absolutely certain that you've got a freezer, and you've got it absolutely full of beef," and she began to turn red and she said, "Yes, full to the door." I said, "That's true all over this country, and it's been caused by the White House." If they stayed quiet we wouldn't have had the trouble, and now the problem was to gradually work that surplus of beef back into the market without breaking every cattleman in the country.

Well, President Ford had his economic troubles, as well as all the other presidents, but he appointed me on the trade—really reappointed me—on the trade board. So he came and
visited with us, but never did really spend any time really with us on the trade board, very little. He had a very pleasing personality and because he was not president very long I did not have the chance to spend the time personally with him that I had with most of the other presidents. But I had a very high regard for him, and although I felt that he was not brilliant, that he made up for that in some respects in being perfectly honest and above-board, and with a great desire to do good instead of harm. Well, he was a person with whom you could work and feel some confidence that you weren't working with a dishonest person, that you were dealing with a very high-type person. [Cut off]

Now, let's put President [James Earl] Carter [Jr.]. [Cut off] Now, I had know President Carter a good part of his entire life [in agriculture] because he was... a peanut farmer down at Plains, Georgia, and also had a peanut plant. Gold Kist was heavily involved in peanuts, and we had had considerable dealings with him. He had produced some good seed, and we had tried to be helpful to him in marketing these peanut seeds. Also, he had been in the legislature here in Atlanta and had done credible job as a legislator. Then when he decided to run for president, I felt that he was--no, for governor--I felt that he was a... capable person and a very dedicated person, and that I should support him for governor, which I did. I did not take any extremely active part in his
campaign, but I did support him and voted for him and tried to be helpful.

I had considerable contact with him as governor, but there are no world-shaking events that take place in just one state, and so, since I was always involved in Washington, I did not spend too much time over at the state capitol unless something particularly came up where I was intensely interested. However, I tried to be helpful to him, every time that he contacted me and every time that I had a chance to be with him. Anyway, towards the last of his term the question came up about building a world congress center here in Atlanta, and I did the economic study on that and came to the conclusion that it would be [a] tremendously... profitable project for the state of Georgia, as well as the city of Atlanta, and that it would bring a lots [sic] of people to Atlanta that we desperately needed to bring here, and that it would be of tremendous benefit in many ways to the state. So consequently, I was strongly in favor of... building it, because it would build Atlanta; it would build Georgia, and bring in all these people to Georgia.

With the three percent tax, sales tax, that we had in Georgia, and four percent in Atlanta, I did the economic study on it, and I explained to President Carter that if the state didn't want to build it, if he'd give us all the three and four percent tax that it would generate, that it would be one of the best economic deals that I had ever known, and that
Gold Kist would be willing to build it. Anyway, we were about to lose it, and right at the last hour or few hours of the last day of the legislative session, when President Carter was finishing his term, it looked like it was going down the drain because President Carter had gotten crossed up with some of the people in the legislature. They were fighting over many other things and this was one thing they were about to lose in the shuffle. Also there was a fight about exactly where the World Congress Center was going to be, if it was approved.

So there was a real fight on it and it looked like it was going down the drain in the last few hours of the legislation. So I told my secretary to get President Carter on the phone. Immediately, everybody that was in the office with me said I was crazy that with the last few hours of the legislature that certainly President Carter would not take the time to talk with me or anybody else, that he was tied up over there and certainly he would not talk. But immediately when we called him, he immediately answered and I explained to him the economic situation on the World Congress Center. I said to him, "You need to leave something here in Georgia that's a monument to you and to your administration. For goodness sake don't let this go down the drain. Please do what is necessary to get it done today." He finally said, well, he understood what I was talking about. I said, "Well, I understand that, but now the thing is to get it done. Will you assure me you'll try to do that?" I said, "It's a great economic thing
that desperately needed to be done." He said, "I assure you then, I'll go to work on it and see if I can put it through before we adjourn," which he was successful in doing.

So that was really one of the crisis periods that I had with him as governor, although I'd had some other periods with him, in fact, been back and been over to talk to him several times. When we would have discussions, we'd meet in his office. He was always busy, but all he would do is order a sandwich for lunch. So we'd sit there and eat the sandwiches and have lunch. So we didn't spend much money for lunch. We always had the lunch there in his room—in his office and they consisted of sandwiches. Anyway, my relationship with him [Carter] was good and I enjoyed my working with him while he was governor.

When he... At the end there when he was making up his mind what he was going to do after he went out as governor, he developed the idea that he wanted to run for president [of the United States]. He looked at some presidents, looked at some of the people who had been elected president. Evidently, he had a feeling that he at least had a chance to be president if he worked at it hard enough. So he asked some eight or ten of us to meet with him at the... Commerce Club here in Atlanta [Georgia] for lunch and talk about it. So we met with him, and, of course, he was not known over the United States, had no recognition and as far as
a political recognition was concerned he had less than one percent recognition.

Well, it looked like an impossible situation. When he went around with the group and asked their opinion, the first person who led off said, "Well, I think your chances of being elected president is zero, zero." Then he said, "Well, don't depend entirely on me, 'cause I didn't think you could be elected governor." So we came on around, and finally I was the last in the group. I said, "Well, as far-fetched as it might seem, I think he can be president--elected president of the United States and I can explain to you why. I said, "We've just been through Watergate, and everybody has lost confidence in the Republican Party. And that although President Ford had restored some of that confidence--that President Ford was not a strong president." If President Carter would work hard, that he could be elected. We had a complete vacuum in the Democratic Party. Any responsible person who had ability such as President Carter had that... felt that he had a chance to win, and that we ought to all support him. I didn't get much support from the group, but I got some. Then when I got back to the office I wrote a memorandum to our [Gold Kist] employees, stating that we had had this meeting and that I felt that the president--that Governor Carter wanted to run for president and that we ought to support him and I'm attaching it to a copy of this
memorandum that I wrote to our officers at Gold Kist, which is self-explanatory.

After he started running, I tried to be as helpful to him [as I could]. In fact when he was governor, I'd been successful in getting the general conference of the Methodist church, which was worldwide to meet here in Atlanta, in which we had maybe thirty to forty thousand Methodists from not only this country, but from all over the world to come to Atlanta. I'd been chairman of the group to bring 'em to Atlanta and chairman of the finance committee. So I felt that I had some privilege of trying to set up the program. Then in setting up the program, I got President Carter to come and speak to this group. President Carter was a lifelong Baptist, but I still felt that he was a very dedicated Christian person and that he would make a great talk to the general conference. So I worked it out for him to come and speak to that general conference. He... did a great job and was a great Christian message that he brought to that conference and that, of course, opened up the Methodist doors all over this country. He told me when he started running for president, nearly everywhere he went nobody had heard of him, but invariably when he would speak, he said some people would come up and say that they were at the Methodist conference and that they would support him and do all they could do to help get him elected. So he was, I think, grateful that we did work it out for him
to speak to this great body of Methodists from all over this country, in fact, from all over the world.

In addition to this, I went to work to raise as much money as I could raise for him [Carter] and do everything I could to get him started. Unfortunately, some of these extreme conservative... began to attack him. Even his own Baptist/Methodist ministers and so we had a real problem there. So some of us got together, including a layman from Mississippi [Owen Cooper], who was a very close personal friend of mine, and who had been elected president of the Southern Christian Baptist Convention, which was the convention--the largest denomination in this country. He and I decided we would get together and he would issue. . . he would issue--sign a statement along with me as a Baptist and let me sign a statement as a Methodist and that we would distribute this statement to the ministers in this country which we did. I don't know that it did any good, but it might have slowed down some of these extreme conservative Baptist preachers who were trying to defeat President Carter.

The Methodist layman from Mississippi was Owen Cooper. He was the first layman, I think, that had ever been elected as president of the Baptist--Southern Baptist group which was the largest Protestant denomination in this country. Anyway, we worked hard to get delegates for the president--for President Carter.
Anyway, President Carter got the nomination, and then in the following night when the race was on, I went to his headquarters here in Atlanta and spent the night there with him part of the time in order to watch the returns. It was touch and go for a long... time during the night, but finally Mississippi came in and turned the deal. I'm sure that Owen Cooper did a lots [sic] of work in Mississippi because he was head of the whole Baptist group, not only in Mississippi, but throughout the country. He had issued some very strong statements in the press and Mississippi. So that turned the deal and President Carter was elected president.

After he was elected president, he had not spent but very little time apparently in Washington and I don't believe had met other presidents. In fact, my--as I remember he had not met any of the other presidents, but President Ford. He only met him when he was in the debate with him. So consequently, he was coming into a Washington situation which was very complex and very difficult, particularly with the press as well as with the congress and the bureaucracy.

So I visited with him on several occasions during the first two years, but he still seemed to be a little confused as to just what all was taking place and was working too, too long hours. It was very difficult for him to find direction or just which the way he should go. In fact, after two years he said to me that at long last that he now began to understand what his job was, and he was hoping he could move
on through and do a good job. Unfortunately, the fact that he did not take a positive direction during the first two years created some problems with the voters and he lost lots of stature.

Unfortunately, he was in the office when... when the OPEC [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries] nations got together and raised the price of oil, which sent inflation sky-rocketing and also interest rates. He was interested in lots of things and had a great desire to do good. Consequently, he was greatly interested in human nature and interested in trying to settle some of the problems in the world. He first got involved with the canal, the Panama Canal, and, of course, wanted to deed that back to Panama which was a very unpopular thing her in this country. So he lost a lots [sic] of ground in doing that, but he was morally right and, of course, that needed to be done, but it was not a very popular political thing to do. But he was determined to go through with it and, of course, he finally worked out an agreement.

Then later when Russia went into Paki--into Afghanistan, he decided he was gonna put his [intelligible] in every way possible and slapped an embargo on Russia. Unfortunately, he did not ask any of us who were supposed to be economic advisors to him about his action on that until after he had taken it. After he had taken it, he asked me to come to the White House which I did, and wanted to know what I thought.
I told him I thought he had made a terrible mistake. It was an awful blunder because there was no way that he could stop food going into Russia--grain or anything else. As long as they had gold, they could get whatever they needed and whatever they wanted, because even in the case of the American grain, if you ship to somewhere else, it'd end up in Russia. So consequently, I thought that it was a horrible mistake, but he had already made it and there was no way to turn it around. Later on I wrote him a letter on this in which I said that "whatever good might have happened from his action. . . ."

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