

Harold Paulk (Hal) Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection
OH ARN 01
Herman Talmadge Interviewed by Harold Paulk (Hal) Henderson
Date: 4/21/81
CD: OH ARN 01, Tracks 1-3, 0:22:35 minutes
Cassette: OH ARN 01, 0:22:35 minutes, Side one only

[CD: Track 1]
[Cassette: Side 1]

HENDERSON: Senator, I've got a few questions already outlined here—

TALMADGE: Sure, fire away.

HENDERSON: --And if you don't mind, I'd like to tape. I hope you don't have any objections...Let me begin with my first question. There was some press reports in 1965 and 1966 that you were growing dissatisfied with being in the United States Senate and that you were longing to come back to Georgia and run for the Senate. Is there any truth to those reports?

TALMADGE: Well, I think any former governor—that serves in the Senate—is disillusioned with the pace in the seat. When a governor is a strong man invested with strong powers, he can make a decision and execute those decisions. In the Senate you can make a decision and talk about it. And even when you pass a piece of legislation, it's a result of compromise and you've got hundred members of the Senate and four hundred and thirty-five members of the House and the president of the United States your authority is diluted. Most all former governors have a sense of frustration serving in the Senate, and I did.

HENDERSON: There was some press reports, of course, that Mr. [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver [Jr.] was the leading candidate, that he had been governor before and that he was trying to make a comeback in '66. There was a report in '65 that you had tried to persuade him to withdraw from the race, where that you could make any entry into that race without splitting the decision.

TALMADGE: Well, that is not true. Vandiver was the leading candidate and I expected to support Vandiver. He called me one time, and I was in Washington, and he told me he needed to see me. And he flew up to the Dulles Airport [Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C.] and I met him early one morning before day. And we went to my home in the District of Columbia and had breakfast. And he told me that his doctor had urged him not to run: he had had a heart attack and thought it might result in him dying. And that he had children to support and family to look after and children to educate, and he was not going to be able to make the race. And he urged me to come back and run for governor. I told him I would consider it and well, about a week [later] the rumors were current in Georgia that I intended to run. I issued a statement that I was considering it. My office was absolutely flooded with telegrams and letters and telephone calls. Virtually every politician in the state—liberal, conservative, moderate—and every other type, black and white—wanted me to run from home and run for governor. The rank and file of the people, what we lawyers call “the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker,” had just the opposite view. They really stated three reasons why I ought to remain in the Senate. They said one, the governor has almost ceased to be a figurehead and the federal government has degenerated into the

federal clerk—the real decisions are now made in Washington. Senator [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.] is not getting any younger, and we don't want two rookies in the Senate at the same time. Number three, you have just served in the Senate long enough to begin to get some seniority to be really effective. So, I decided to stay in the Senate.

[HENDERSON and TALMADGE adjust their microphone positions so they can be heard over a vacuum cleaner running in the background.]

HENDERSON: Let me go back to a statement that Mr. [James Lynwood (Jimmy)] Bentley [Jr.] made shortly after Mr. Vandiver's statement. You're getting into some of my questions here, but that's fine. Just feel free to discuss anything you want to.

TALMADGE: Probably I anticipated some.

HENDERSON: That's fine with me. Any way you want to answer it. But, I like to make sure I understand now—you had no intentions up 'til May the eighteenth of even running for the governorship. Is that right?

TALMADGE: No, I was supporting Vandiver.

HENDERSON: All right, that's a clear equivocal statement. All right, good. And at no time [did] you request Mr. Vandiver to withdraw from the race prior to this notion.

TALMADGE: No, never had the notion.

HENDERSON: All right now as I understand it the purpose of his flying to Washington [D.C.] on May sixteenth—

TALMADGE: Was to tell me that he would not run and urge me to do so.

HENDERSON: Now, at that time were you still considering or—

TALMADGE: --I never seriously considered—

HENDERSON: --You never seriously—

TALMADGE: --No, no until Vandiver told me he would not run.

HENDERSON: All right, after he said that you would not run [*sic*], did you seriously consider it then?

TALMADGE: Yes, yes, I did. About a week.

HENDERSON: All right, you held a news conference on May the eighteenth. On May the twenty-third, you issue a statement—you are not running.

TALMADGE: Right.

HENDERSON: During that period of time, when did you finally decide you were not going to run?

TALMADGE: When I heard the voice of the people, as I enumerated in my previous statement. While all the politicians virtually wanted me to run, the people did not.

HENDERSON: All right now, Margaret Shannon who was Washington correspondence for the Atlanta newspaper—she had an article on May the twenty-fourth or the twenty-fifth, after your statement, saying that while your office had received a great deal of correspondence, as you said telephone calls and so forth, it had not really been tabulated. So, you could not really determine what the will of the people was and the gist of her argument was or her statement was that May the eighteenth, you already knew you were not going to run.

TALMADGE: No, I did not.

HENDERSON: You did not. So, you disagree with that statement.

TALMADGE: I gave it consideration. I issued the statement.

[Telephone rings. Pause while TALMADGE answers the phone.]

[CD: Track 2]

HENDERSON: Is it fair to say...I'm trying to pin down exactly when you made the decision as when you would enter or consider entering the race.

TALMADGE: There is no way I can tell you the hour and the day.

HENDERSON: I see.

TALMADGE: It was sometime between Vandiver's visit to me in Washington and the time that I issued my statement. I don't even remember the date.

[Sound of dishes clanking together in background]

HENDERSON: OK, OK. And you say that the [Ellis Gibbs] Arnall candidacy was not really factor in your consideration.

TALMADGE: --Oh, it might have been at first, I don't remember.

HENDERSON: But it was not *the* major factor.

TALMADGE: No, it was not.

HENDERSON: Nor was [Howard Hollis (Bo)] Callaway the major factor.

TALMADGE: No, no, no one individual was the major factor.

HENDERSON: You said earlier that there was a lot of support for you to stay in the Senate.

Where was this desire for you to stay in the Senate? Was it coming from the business community?

TALMADGE: The masses of the people—what we lawyers call “the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker”—the non-politicians.

HENDERSON: Did the business community let their will be known that they desired you to stay in Washington? You had tenure, seniority; you were a very important person in Washington—

TALMADGE: I don't know what you mean by “the business community.” The business community in Lovejoy [Georgia] is different than the business community in Atlanta.

HENDERSON: How about the—

TALMADGE: Politicians wanted me to run. Those who were not politicians wanted me to stay in the Senate.

HENDERSON: So—

TALMADGE: So as far as I'm concerned the business community is the fellow that runs the filling station in Tifton, Georgia, or barbershop in Tifton, Georgia, or bank in Atlanta. You understand?

HENDERSON: OK, let me be more specific then. Were there any input from, say, large corporation executives or any bankers saying that "we would prefer you to stay in the Senate"?

TALMADGE: Well, I'm sure I heard from some of them but not to the exclusion of the masses of the people. I don't pay much attention to president bankers. They can't get you as many votes as the barber in Tifton can.

HENDERSON: OK. All right. Both Mr. [Lester Garfield] Maddox and Mr. Callaway claim that when you issued your statement on May the eighteenth that this was cause Mr. [Lyndon Baines] Johnson who was then president, had talked you in to doing this, so to speak. How do you respond to that statement?

TALMADGE: I don't recall Johnson ever had any conversations with me about the matter one way or another.

HENDERSON: Well, that was your statement then. Yes—

TALMADGE: So far as I know, he didn't even know that I was considering it. Johnson didn't vote in Georgia.

HENDERSON: The Republicans were making the argument though that he was trying to maintain Democratic control of the governorship in Georgia and that he feared a Republican governor in Georgia. This was their argument anyway.

TALMADGE: I don't recall that Johnson even knew that I was considering running for governor at the time.

HENDERSON: I have a press quote in from *The Athens-Banner Herald* [Athens, Georgia]. There was a series of articles about this whole period of events from May the eighteenth to May the twenty-third. And during that period Mr. Vandiver is quoted—now it could be misquote or whatever—but he said that you on May the eighteenth or May the nineteenth had already made the decision you would not run. But, he urged you to stay in the race as a potential candidate until the party could come up with a strong candidate.

TALMADGE: I don't recall that that was even discussed.

HENDERSON: OK. Did you at any time attempt to get someone in the race after Mr. Vandiver dropped out?

TALMADGE: I don't recall that I did, no.

HENDERSON: You did not talk with Mr. Theo Campbell[?] about possibly entering—

TALMADGE: It's possible, I don't know. I don't recall. That's been fifteen years ago.

HENDERSON: So, in this same article it said on May the eighteenth and May the nineteenth that you called Mr. William [Redding (Bill)] Bowdoin [Jr.] who was a banker in Atlanta and urged him to enter the race.

TALMADGE: Don't recall any such conversation.

HENDERSON: I talked with Mr. [James Harrison (Jimmy)] Gray [Sr.]--I talked with him last week--and did you at any time confer with Mr. Gray about getting in to the race?

TALMADGE: Not to my recollection.

HENDERSON: If you had to support anyone in that campaign would you say you would support Mr. Gray?

TALMADGE: Yes.

HENDERSON: Or did support Mr. Gray?

TALMADGE: Yes, I did.

HENDERSON: Is it fair to say that he was the candidate of the Talmadge organization?

TALMADGE: I don't know what you mean by "the Talmadge organization." I took no active part and I presume I was the head of the Talmadge organization at that time. I contributed to Mr. Gray's campaign; I voted for Mr. Gray.

HENDERSON: You did not actively campaign for Mr. Gray?

TALMADGE: No, I did not.

HENDERSON: Is there any reason why not?

TALMADGE: Well, [in the] first place, I didn't think Jimmy could get elected. [In the] second place, at that time I was not participating in political campaigns, except my own, actively.

HENDERSON: Why didn't you think Mr. Gray could get elected?

TALMADGE: He was not well enough known. He had been in the state a very short time except World War II. He was born in Massachusetts, educated in the Northeast. Not very

well known in the state. He's a brilliant man, a very able man, a very forceful speaker, a brilliant writer, but he was not very well known. Rank and file of the people didn't know who he was.

HENDERSON: So, he entered the race without discussing it with you at all?

TALMADGE: I don't recall that he discussed it with me. He may have; I don't remember.

HENDERSON: OK. Could I just go through the other candidates that are in there?

TALMADGE: Sure, sure.

HENDERSON: If you could just assess what you thought were their strong points and maybe their liabilities. Mr. [James Earl (Jimmy)] Carter [Jr.], who entered the race late—

TALMADGE: Well, at that time, Jimmy was completely unknown—that was his greatest liability along with Mr. Gray. It's difficult to run a race for governor of Georgia if the people don't know who you are.

HENDERSON: How about Mr. Maddox?

TALMADGE: Maddox had had a great deal of publicity about his segregation difficulties and he'd run ads in the paper. He was well known probably as well or better known than Governor Arnall at the time.

HENDERSON: Do you think he had any liabilities?

TALMADGE: Well, I don't remember the sequence of events at that time. He was not a forceful orator. 'Course his liabilities were that he had been taking a very strong pro-segregationist position and that cut both ways. It was an asset and a liability at the same time and a greater asset than it was a liability.

HENDERSON: How about Mr. [Garland Turk] Byrd?

TALMADGE: Who?

HENDERSON: Garland Byrd?

TALMADGE: Garland, as I recall, had a heart attack and he had to drop out, too. [That] is my recollection.

HENDERSON: That was in the '62 race.

TALMADGE: Was it?

HENDERSON: He tried to make his comeback in '66--

TALMADGE: I didn't know he ran in '66--

HENDERSON: He got five percent of the votes.

TALMADGE: I didn't know he even ran at that time... I'd forgotten it.

HENDERSON: Yes sir, he ran. [chuckles] Not a major factor in the race.

TALMADGE: Yeah.

HENDERSON: How about Mr. Callaway? What do you think were his assets as a candidate?

TALMADGE: I'd known Bo Callaway a long time. As a matter fact, I appointed him to the Board of Regents. Bo Callaway was a good man. He was not a good candidate. He was rigid in his military discipline. He'd go into town and if the schedule required him to get there at 4:13 and leave at 4:17, he did exactly that.

HENDERSON: [chuckles]

TALMADGE: He was a little glacial.

HENDERSON: How about Mr. Arnall?

TALMADGE: Well, Ellis had been governor of the state back in '43 to '47, wasn't it?

HENDERSON: Yes, sir.

TALMADGE: He had had little contact with the electorate, subsequent to that time. Of course, he got the Democratic nomination, as you know—no, he didn't; Maddox got the Democratic nomination. He forced Maddox into a runoff and he was a little beyond his time, I guess, is the best way to put it.

HENDERSON: Do you think he was too liberal for the Georgia constituency at that time?

TALMADGE: Yes, yes, he was.

HENDERSON: How would you define, in the context of the sixties, a conservative and a liberal in Georgia politics?

TALMADGE: Well, it was primarily the race issue [that] was the delineation point. Ellis, you know, had been all over the country making speeches largely about the two governor rife, praising his liberalism and that didn't suit Georgians too well. They don't mind

somebody criticizing Georgia within the boundaries of Georgia, but they don't like him going to Boston [Massachusetts] to do it.

HENDERSON: Mr. Maddox wins the Democratic nomination and he takes on Mr. Callaway. Mr. Callaway gets a plurality but not a majority. Of course, the constitution throws to the House. Do you think the people of Georgia would have been better served if there had been a runoff election, instead of having an election by the General Assembly?

TALMADGE: Oh, that's water over the dam, fifteen years, I don't know. No way you can bring that back.

HENDERSON: Do you have any regrets not getting in the governor's race in 1966?

TALMADGE: No.

HENDERSON: None at all.

TALMADGE: Uh-uh.

HENDERSON: I would like to make sure that I understand you correctly. May the eighteenth when you held your news conference, you were considering it. You were considering the possibility. You had not closed it out.

TALMADGE: That is correct.

HENDERSON: By May the twenty-third, you had decided, "I would not."

TALMADGE: That's right.

HENDERSON: And so you would disagree strongly with what Margaret Shannon said that on May the eighteenth, you issued that statement, but you thought or you felt like you would not enter the campaign at all.

TALMADGE: Her statement is in error.

[CD: Track 3]

HENDERSON: Well, as you say you were not a candidate, but I wanted to ask these questions about the possibility of you being a candidate and that's why I wanted to interview you and get your version of what went on then. Senator Talmadge, thanks.

TALMADGE: You mean had I run?

HENDERSON: Yes.

TALMADGE: I think I would have been elected.

HENDERSON: Oh, I'm sure. No doubt about it. I keep coming back to this thing though, about, you say you listened to the will of the people.

TALMADGE: Yes.

HENDERSON: But no, no one, nobody, no specific banker or no specific businessman said, "Senator, we need you to stay up here because you have ten years of seniority."

TALMADGE: Well, I'm sure thousands said that.

HENDERSON: Yeah, but that was not the major factor?

TALMADGE: That's the reason I stayed in the Senate, 'cause the rank and file of the people of Georgia wanted me to stay in the Senate. Politicians did not. I think I learned to listen to the voice of the people pretty well over a long period of years.

HENDERSON: Why do you think the politicians wanted you to run?

TALMADGE: Oh, I don't know. Thought I was a certain winner maybe.

HENDERSON: Mr. Roy [Vincent] Harris, editor of *The Augusta Chronicle* [Augusta, Georgia] and a longtime strong supporter of yours—

TALMADGE: Yeah.

HENDERSON: --He had a statement. He says, "Talmadge's entry in the election..."—this is in his newspaper--"...was a desperate effort to deflate the grassroots surge to elect Howard H. "Bo" Callaway, governor on the Republican ticket."

TALMADGE: That's Roy's opinion, I guess, if he said that.

HENDERSON: Do you disagree with that?

TALMADGE: Of course.

HENDERSON: Do you disagree with *The Moultrie Observer* [Moultrie, Georgia] shortly after you've talked about the possibility of entering: "The Democratic Party was falling apart and there was only one strong candidate that could keep it together and that was Senator Talmadge."

TALMADGE: Well, I didn't necessarily agree with that. I didn't think the Democratic Party was falling apart. The Democratic Party has never been a cohesive organization in Georgia, but the overwhelming majority of the people identify with the Democratic Party.

HENDERSON: How about this statement from *The Dalton Daily Citizen* [sic] [*The Daily Citizen News*, Dalton, Georgia], which said that, “The top signal callers in Atlanta including highway director Jim [James Lester] Gillis [Sr.] saw Mr. Arnall and Mr. Callaway as a one-two threat.” They wanted you to come into the race.

TALMADGE: He was a politician and he wanted me to run.

HENDERSON: All right. Anybody else in high political office that wanted you to run besides Mr. Gillis?

TALMADGE: Why, I think virtually all of them at that time, that I remember. I don't know. I guess I sent my files to the University of Georgia [Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies]. I haven't looked at them in fifteen years. But I am giving you my recollection of that period. Virtually every politician in Georgia of every persuasion, white and black, wanted me to run for governor. The non-politicians did not, just the opposite.

HENDERSON: Do you have some correspondence or files, you said, at the University of Georgia?

TALMADGE: I guess they are. I sent my papers over there. I guess they—

HENDERSON: Are they open to the public now?

TALMADGE: Don't know. [The] library can tell you.

HENDERSON: If they were then I could use them, I—

TALMADGE: Well, sure.

HENDERSON: But they're not restricted. I mean, you have not restricted them—

TALMADGE: [I've] made no agreement with the university yet. Just shipped them down there. They're literally thousands and thousands of papers there. I don't think I have even given them the deed to the papers as yet.

HENDERSON: So, then there not open to the public yet. I could not—

TALMADGE: Probably not. I don't guess they'd classified them. I reckon there would be three or four rooms full this size.

[Telephone rings. Pause so TALMADGE can answer the phone.]

HENDERSON: Let me ask you one more question. You said you supported Mr. Gray.

What kind of support did you give him?

TALMADGE: I contributed to his campaign fund and voted for him.

HENDERSON: Did you work behind the scenes—

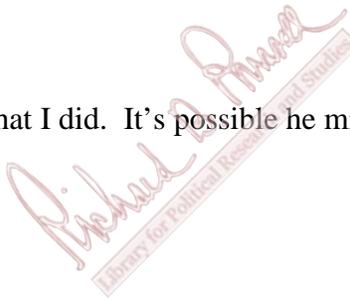
TALMADGE: Of course, if anybody asked me who I was going to vote for I told them Jimmy Gray. I didn't get on the telephone and beat it, if that's what you're referring to.

HENDERSON: And, he got into the race entirely on his own. I mean you did not confer with him?

TALMADGE: I don't recall that I did. It's possible he might have called me; I don't remember that he did.

HENDERSON: OK.

[End of Interview]



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