

Harold Paulk (Hal) Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection  
Series I: Ellis Arnall  
OH ARN 19  
Ellis G. Arnall Interviewed by Harold Paulk (Hal) Henderson, Sr.  
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[CD: Track 1]  
[Cassette: Side 1]

HENDERSON: ...and in that particular election, you supported [Melvin Ernest] M.E. Thompson. What was your role in his campaign?

ARNALL: I was not very active in it. I contacted a number of my friends over the telephone. I issued a statement to the press that I was supporting M.E. Thompson, but I do not recall having been *actually* involved in the campaign by meeting with his group or participating in projections of what should be done or actually going out and making stump speeches for him.

HENDERSON: Now, according to the press reports, he appointed you and Mr. [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers as his co-campaign directors along with a man by the name of Mr. [John C.] Beasley. Was that--

ARNALL: John Beasley who was from Tattnall County [Georgia].

HENDERSON: Was that more symbolic?

ARNALL: More symbolic than actual, sure.

HENDERSON: Was Mr. Rivers more involved in this campaign than you were?

ARNALL: No, I wouldn't think so. Ed Rivers had a lot of contacts over the state. He had been very active in the Woodmen of the World [Life Insurance Society] and they had camps in every crossroad in Georgia. And he'd also been very active in the Ku Klux Klan. At that time, the Klan was very popular in Georgia, although it was beginning to fade out. But he had contacts that was through the Woodmen of the World and the Ku Klux Klan and the fact that he'd been in the legislature and had been governor. He had worlds of contacts in every county in Georgia and had friends everywhere. Of course, anyone who takes a position has enemies, too, but he had a lot of friends.

HENDERSON: OK. Was Thompson your first choice in the 1948 campaign to run against Mr. [Eugene] Talmadge?

ARNALL: Well, it was very obvious that he was going to run and anyone else could not have cut the figure that he would cut, so it was very obvious that he would be the first choice for all anti-Talmadge people.

HENDERSON: Now, there was some press speculation that [James Vinson] Jimmy Carmichael might try to run in '48. Did you encourage him to seek the nomination?

ARNALL: Well, now, let me get this straight. I resigned as governor on, I believe, it was January the eighteenth, 1948. Right, '48.

HENDERSON: Now, it had to have been '47 because the legislature elected him...wouldn't it?

ARNALL: '47.

HENDERSON: '47.

ARNALL: Yes. I resigned January the eighteenth, 1947, after Thompson had qualified as lieutenant governor. Although the court held, and I knew I could be governor for four more years under a technicality, I had no desire to do so. I had business commitments, lecture engagements. I was always tied down. I couldn't have been governor. And second, I didn't want to hold under a technicality. And I felt that the lieutenant governor, which office I had been responsible in creating, was to take the place of the governor if there were a vacancy in the office of governor. So, although I was governor for four more years due to the peculiarities involved when I resigned, Thompson became acting governor vested with the executive powers. And then the [Georgia] Supreme Court held that, and while I would have been governor for four years since a vacancy had occurred, Thompson held for only two years, not four years. So, at the end of his two years, he had to run for the end of the term and Talmadge defeated him in that election. So then Talmadge was governor for two more years and then it was necessary to hold an election for the full term of four years. And since

Talmadge [*sic*] personified the anti-Talmadge forces at that time, why we all supported him, we were against Talmadge. I did not try to get Jimmy Carmichael to run, as I recall it, because I thought with Thompson there they would have split the vote again. And that was the only way Talmadge got elected in the first go around, Gene Talmadge against Jimmy Carmichael was that the anti-Talmadge forces split.

HENDERSON: Looking back on that '48 election, here's an anti-Talmadge faction united once again, but yet Herman [Eugene] Talmadge is able to win. Why do you think he is able to win in 1948?

ARNALL: Purely on the race issue. That was always the strength of the Talmadge followers, the race issue. That was the way Gene Talmadge got elected; the way he beat—I defeated him in 1942, because I had the university issue. Although he yelled, “Nigger, nigger, nigger,” the people were more excited about the education issue at that time, so I could overcome the race issue. And secondly, I didn't let it get to be a part of the campaign because I took the position that he and I were in accord. But the issue was not race but the issue of education. But then when Thompson had no education issue, and nothing overshadowed the race issue and no one else did for years. [telephone rings] So it got to be purely who could yell “nigger” the loudest. [tape stops and starts]

There's one thing I want to make very clear. After I resigned as governor and engaged in a nation-wide lecture tour for three or four years, wrote books and the books sold the lecture, the lecture sold the books, became head of the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers, independent film corporation in Hollywood [California], director of the

Motion Picture Industry Council and other things, and became active in the insurance business, I pulled the curtain down on politics. During that period of time, I had absolutely very little interest in politics. I was in business profession, building a law practice, making money. And while I was interested in trying to keep the anti-Talmadge forces in power, I was not actually actively interested or active in the political arena.

HENDERSON: OK. Now in the '48 campaign, Talmadge made you and Ed Rivers one of the major issues. And the Talmadge folks had several issues that they brought up and used against you. And I'd like to take each one of these individually and let you respond to those.

ARNALL: It's been a long time ago, but I'll try.

HENDERSON: [laughs] OK.

ARNALL: Go right along. I don't even remember what they were--other than the race issue.

HENDERSON: Right. The Talmadge faction accuses you of on your lecture circuit, "slandering the state and damaging its reputation." How do you respond to that?

ARNALL: That is and was completely untrue. As governor of Georgia, I gave Georgia the best national reputation it had ever had. That is attested by historians. For example, Doctor [Ellis Merton] Coulter said that the thing had—the worm had turned, that everybody [who] came to Georgia bragged on Georgia's and it's governor, that we gave the state a great

reputation and a great name. So, I pointed out the problems we were having: that we were low in income and therefore did not adequately finance education, and this brought about a great deal of ignorance on the part of some of our people but we had to cure that. But I did not slander the state. I gave the state a good name from that time up until now. It's never had a better name.

HENDERSON: OK. Of course, race was a big issue in that campaign and in Washington [D.C.], President [Harry S.] Truman was pushing a civil rights program. The Talmadge people accused you of being in support of the president's civil rights program. Were you a supporter of that or were you opposed to it?

ARNALL: I don't remember, but I assume I was a supporter of it because the Supreme Court had already held that we were going to have first-class citizenship for all our people and I believe in law and order. I had a chance to control Georgia for forty years that I take the Talmadge view "to hell with the courts," but I would not do it because that was not my nature. I believe in law and order. And if Truman, who I think was the greatest president the nation ever had, believed in civil rights, I believed in civil rights. As a matter of fact, I believe the greatest right in a democracy is the right to vote and the duty to vote. So I'm a strong believer in civil rights, the rights of every citizen to have first-class citizenship. And I'm sure I did then.

[CD: Track 2]

HENDERSON: The Talmadge faction accuses you of wanting to abolish segregation in the '48 campaign. I know it's been several years since this campaign, but was that the true charge?

ARNALL: I didn't want to abolish it. The courts had abolished it and I'm a law and order man. Therefore, I was for abolishing it.

HENDERSON: OK. How about the charge that you wanted to abolish the county unit system?

ARNALL: I did. I think it's a wonderful thing. It was completely wrong. It penalized the most people. It awarded the voting rights in the primaries to small counties, far in excess of the rights to big counties. For example, three small two-unit counties could get as many votes as Fulton County [Georgia] which would have a thousand times or more. Yes, I thought the county unit system was nothing in the world from start to finish but an effort to control Georgia politics by the machine bosses. And as a matter of fact, I never believed in the unit system but since that was in effect I would have been a fool to say I'm against it. I would have been defeated. I had to get elected first. And just like I believe—or was against the poll tax but I didn't come out against the poll tax. [I] had to get elected first. I'm a great believer—I was for the eighteen year old voting. If I'd have come out for that, I would have been defeated. You've got to get in office in order to control concepts that are in step with the times.

HENDERSON: Now, one thing that the Talmadge faction attempted to do, perhaps to diminish your reputation in the state, was to accuse you and Rivers of shaking down road contractors in that campaign by the use of what they call “negotiated contracts.”

ARNALL: Well, that is not true. There was never any “shaking down” of anybody. My administration was as honest as the day is long. There was never a breath of scandal about. It is true that I always use road contracts to garner votes to get the right man elected to office and have done it ever since, too, and always will. Road building is largely politics and what I did was try to develop contracts where they would help the most people and get the most votes. But there was never any shakedown of anything, no shakedown of anything. There was never a breath of scandal. As a matter of fact, when I went into office and all the time I was in politics, I said If anyone hears of any wrongdoing or crookedness, come and tell me. I’m going to be the first person to send them to the penitentiary.

HENDERSON: All right. Now Roy [Vincent] Harris, who by this time, ’48, has turned against you. He continually harangues you in his newspaper the *Augusta Courier* [Augusta, Georgia].

ARNALL: Right.

HENDERSON: And he accuses you of coming up, in your administration, with the concept of a negotiated contract.

ARNALL: Well, that's been so long ago I—"negotiated contracts." I don't know quite the meaning of "negotiated contracts." All contracts are negotiated. For example, if a man builds—gets a bid on eighteen miles of highway to asphalt it and it's later determined that it needs to be extended another four miles, you negotiate with him to do it because he already had the low bid. I don't know what he means by negotiated contracts. I negotiated anything I could if it's to the interest of the people.

HENDERSON: All right. What he was saying that these were contracts which were issued not on a competitive basis. But somebody in the highway department and some contractor made a deal, and in return somebody's campaign treasury benefited from that. That's the charge they made in '48.

ARNALL: Well, well, whatever the charge was that was untrue because if you remember, I brought a suit against Doctor Hiram W. [Wesley] Evans and the Ku Klux Klan and the asphalt people claiming that they negotiated contracts. He told them what to bid, the bidders, and they were all rigged, so I was always strong for honesty in getting the people the benefit of the best deal they could make. But in politics it was a custom then, I suppose it's still a custom, to charge your opponents with anything that's unrighteous. But I had an honest, straightforward administration and there was never a breath of scandal about it.

HENDERSON: So, you're saying that you and Rivers did not engage in any type of shakedown of road contractors in the '48 campaign.

ARNALL: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. That is not true. That's a political charge that's made with no basis of fact.

HENDERSON: How about the charge that you had a good press relation while you were governor with the newspapers--you got favorable stories--but Harris says that the reason you had such favorable stories is because you had almost a million dollars of legal advertisement.

ARNALL: Well, that is not true. I got favorable press. I had the greatest press support of any governor before or since because I took them into my confidence. They were part of the team and we worked together for the welfare of the people. In so far as the advertising, I suppose that little reference to the fact that when you have a new constitution or constitutional amendment you have to advertise it in one paper in each, I've forgotten whether it's each county, each district, or somewhere, and of course, I advertised it on the theory that the people ought to know. I believe in advertising. One of the great differences in government today is the people don't know what the hell is going on.

HENDERSON: An old charge that they brought back up, going back to your days at the university [University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia], when you were president of the [National] Pan-Hellenic Council.

ARNALL: Right.

HENDERSON: And they said that while you were in that capacity you made several thousand dollars from dances because of some arrangements you made.

ARNALL: Well, that is—what happened was that I was president of the Pan-Hellenic Council, and in order for anyone to hold a dance in Clarke County [Georgia], to which students of the university can go, they had to get the approval of the Pan-Hellenic Council. And if the dance was profitable, they had to pay the Pan-Hellenic Council some of the money. And then the Pan-Hellenic Council in turn, under my direction as president, would negotiate with national bands to come down and put on dances. We would use that money to help pay the bands. So, while we dealt with big money, it all went to the Pan-Hellenic Council. Nothing went to me. There were investigations, charges made, counter charges, Doctor [Steadman Vincent] Sanford was president, and they gave me a clean bill of health and apologized with any critic of mine who was an enemy that started such a false rumor.

HENDERSON: OK.

ARNALL: I was president of everything over there including the Honor Court [University of Georgia, School of Law], Chief Justice of the Honor Court. I ran things right.

HENDERSON: In retrospect, do you think that you were an asset or a liability to the Thompson campaign?

ARNALL: Well, that I don't know. It all depends—you can't generalize. I think to some people I was an asset; a lot of people who believed in me and my friends, and I was a detriment to the campaign as far as many of my enemies were concerned and my racial views. But no, I think I helped him more than I hurt him if I had to say because he needed all the support he could get and I had a lot of it.

HENDERSON: Did you attend the 1948 Democratic National Convention?

ARNALL: No. I attended the '44 and made a speech seconding [Henry Agard] Wallace's nomination. That's when Truman got the vice presidency.

[CD: Track 3]

HENDERSON: Now this is a question I've asked you before, but I'm going to ask you again. Did you have any ambitions to be the presidential or vice presidential candidate of your party in 1948?

ARNALL: Well, actually I think *Fortune* magazine did a poll, and I was next to James [Vincent] Forrestal all in the choice of the American people. I had many—Oregon—many states I didn't even know anybody. They wanted me to be—cast their vote for me to be vice president and whatnot, the president of Vassar [College, Poughkeepsie, New York], just a lot of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations, U.S.]. Yes, I was in great demand and I—had I not been unpopular at home for my national views, I could have been one of the

nominees. But at that time the more popular you were in the rest of the country the more unpopular you were at home. And the more popular you were at home the more unpopular you were in the rest of the country because at that time still the South was going through a rebirthing day. It was somewhere like Ireland is in the United Kingdom; we were kind of stepchildren. And I didn't want to bring about the readmission of the South to the Union where we began to be recognized and brought about conditions in that enabled [the potter?] to become present was the freight rate fight. Look, today you need money for education. You need money for health. You need money for high standards of living and that's what I fought for. So, yes, I would have been available. Yes, indeed.

HENDERSON: Let me refresh your memory about the Supreme Court decision that took place in '47. After the Georgia Supreme Court rules that M.E. Thompson should be acting governor, it also rules that the Talmadge executive committee is the legitimate executive committee and will stay in power, which meant that Talmadge people would send the delegation [to the] 1948 Democratic Convention. If Thompson had been able to retain control of the executive committee and control who the delegates were, [do] you think that would be an advantage for you in your quest for the vice presidential nomination?

ARNALL: Absolutely. Never had any doubt.

HENDERSON: And did you see that Supreme Court decision as a setback to your ambitions for higher public office?

ARNALL: No. I thought that the rest of the country would pay no attention to the Talmadge delegation, necessarily. I think it was a setback in that I lost the momentum that the Thompson delegation could have given me at the convention. But it didn't necessarily foreclose a possibility. It hurt it a lot, but didn't foreclose it.

HENDERSON: Well, now, the next question is if you still had that ambition, that desire, why didn't you go to the 1948 convention?

ARNALL: Well, I wasn't a delegate. That's why. The delegates are elected and I was not a delegate.

HENDERSON: But you could have been there to promote your cause, couldn't you?

ARNALL: Well, I didn't think so, no.

HENDERSON: OK. All right.

ARNALL: You've got to have a base.

HENDERSON: All right. In the 1950 race where Talmadge runs again... Did you ever consider entering the 1950 campaign?

ARNALL: Oh yes, every time the election came up I talked about it but I never seriously considered it until '66 when I thought that these things that I had fought for were now accepted. But I always just talked about it. For example, when [Samuel Ernest] Ernie Vandiver [Jr.] was talking about “no, not one” getting into the university or close the schools, I now decided to be a candidate again.

HENDERSON: On January the twenty-ninth, 1950, Thompson announces his candidacy. And he said he hadn't talked with anybody when he did that. And you said, when a reporter asked you, it wouldn't do to print your reaction to his announcement. What did you mean by that?

ARNALL: I don't remember other than I think I was peeved with him for taking that position.

HENDERSON: Of running, or of not consulting with you?

ARNALL: Of not consulting with me. That was a negative thing. He took a negative position. So I thought that was uncalled for. So it wouldn't do for me to say what I think about it—of him.

HENDERSON: In 1953, you engage in a very extensive speaking tour throughout the state before civic clubs. Was this preparing for possible candidacy in '54?

ARNALL: No, no. It was—many people thought that had I been more attentive to my state supporters after I finished the governorship that I could have sooner or later gotten to be the dominant force again in Georgia. But I was too busy. I was in Hollywood off and on, New York or London, in the insurance business, building a law firm. I became head of OPS [Office of Price Stabilization]. I was in the UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] vice chairman, UNESCO and U.S. Commission on UNESCO. I had so much to do and so many commitments that I didn't pay attention to the home folks like I should have or might have. And so when I found time along I began to make talks at civic clubs and so forth. I was invited to hundreds and hundreds but the problem with making that, and is now, if you accept one and it gets in the paper, which it will, you've got twenty more and on and on. And you know, time is all a man's got in the law business and running insurance companies, motion picture outfits, OPS, and things like that.

HENDERSON: You predicted in one of your speeches, well, several of your speeches, that the state sales tax that was passed in '51 will be the major campaign issue in '54. That never came about. First, the sales tax was very unpopular but then the unpopularity apparently dies out.

ARNALL: Right. Until today it seems to be a reasonably popular tax. And as you know the governments of the democracies, western democracies, for the most part [denounce?] themselves on what they call the VAT tax, Value-Added Tax. And there's an effort always on foot here to put that in, but the chairman of the LANS[?] committee from Oregon who

tried that with the TV. So the sales tax is popular and unpopular, but I thought when I fought it, it was very unpopular, very unpopular. It was very unpopular and I thought it would be an issue but it never got to be an issue.

HENDERSON: If it had become or continued to be a burning issue, would that have led you to seriously consider entering the campaign?

ARNALL: No.

HENDERSON: There's some people that say that one of the reasons why you didn't seriously consider '54 was prior to the primary the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision was made.

ARNALL: Well, of course, from the first Supreme Court decision all the way through--the Georgia decision, Columbus, Georgia, all of them--were racial. And I was tarred as being what they called a racist for the blacks, in that I wanted first-class citizenship for everybody. I thought they all ought to be equal as citizens. So, there was no way in the world I could have come back politically until and unless that concept was accepted by a majority of the people.

[CD: Track 4]

ARNALL: And in '66, I thought it had been. I found it had not been. And, unfortunately, I don't think it has yet today. The papers talk about it, people talk about it. They're afraid to say anything against the black man but when you get in a voting booth, secret ballot, many people vote on the basis of race, religion, creed, and so forth--unfortunately. I think in time we will overcome that but I think it will be an eon or two.

HENDERSON: Are you saying then that if the *Brown* decision hadn't been made, you might have considered running in '54?

ARNALL: No. No.

HENDERSON: You would not have run regardless?

ARNALL: No. I ran in '66 thinking that it had had time to get everything settled down and people accepted those views, but I found that it's not true. [Lester Garfield] Maddox defeated me purely on the race issue, purely on the race issue.

HENDERSON: I've read an account--and I want you to either confirm or deny this--about in '53 there was several important Talmadge leaders who were very much opposed to [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.] being elected governor. People like Roy Harris, [James Lester] Jim Gillis [Sr.], etcetera. And according to this report, that group plus you and Rivers and Thompson came together and were willing to support Jim Gillis.

ARNALL: That's not true.

HENDERSON: OK. So, there never was any type of alliance?

ARNALL: Never was, never was.

HENDERSON: All right. Let's go down to the '58 election. There's a school integration crisis—

ARNALL: Shut this off. [tape stops and starts].

HENDERSON: All right. Governor, let's switch to the '58 election. Did you ever consider making that race?

ARNALL: No, I did not. I did not. Never considered it at all. Although frequently during those periods of time I remember when Ernie Vandiver was elected governor on the platform of, "no, not one" entering the University of Georgia black and threatened to close it. I said if he did I would run. I've forgotten what year that was.

HENDERSON: It's the '62 race. Well, that leads me to my next question. You make the statement that if the schools are closed, you will be a candidate.

ARNALL: Right. I would have had an education issue to overcome the race issue, like I did when I beat Tal[madge]—to overcome the race issue, you needed a hot issue that touched everybody or many people and education would have done it again. So, I said sure and I would have been elected if they closed the university system.

HENDERSON: Well, now, do you remember the [James Soloman] Peters letter that was made public in 1959?

ARNALL: Yes, I remember something about it. He advised Talmadge and everybody that I'd get elected if they closed the schools, that that would ensure my election. And he was chairman of the state Democratic Committee as I recall it, and a member of the Board of the Regents.

HENDERSON: Chair of the--let's see, he was head of the state Board of Education.

ARNALL: Yes.

HENDERSON: The Vandiver administration decides not to close the schools down.

ARNALL: Right.

HENDERSON: What influence do you think you had on keeping the schools open?

ARNALL: Well, I think that was the thing that kept them open. The threat that if they closed them, I would again have an educational issue that would overshadow the race issue and whip them. And they didn't want to gamble.

HENDERSON: Now—

ARNALL: And, of course, as it worked out, Ernie Vandiver--and by the way he and I are good friends, time works wonders--he came out of it, when he kept 'em open, a hero. Although he repudiated his campaign pledge because they had the John [Adams] Sibley committee going around over the state and people said they wanted to keep the university open so he said he'd put education ahead of race and keep it open. And so he adopted my view.

HENDERSON: Now when you say--this is in 1961, I believe--that you would not run for the governorship in '62. You also made the statement that you would never seek public office again.

ARNALL: I thought I would not and had no intention of doing it except when '66 came around, I'd been reasonably successful at that time in business and the law practice and other activities, and so I thought I could finance a campaign without going begging and getting obligated to people. And I thought it'd be a lot of fun to be governor again. And I thought that the things I'd fought for had come to pass and were accepted. And so, I ran in '66 and although I got the most votes, [I] was not the Democratic nominee. [I] got the most votes in

the primary because my good friend Carl [Edward] Sanders had changed the law to where in order to be the nominee you had to get a majority of the vote, not a plurality but a majority, and that was the first time that had been in effect. And although I got a plurality, I didn't get the majority, and there was about seven or nine candidates, I think, in that race. [to someone else] Leave it on that. I ran first, Maddox second, [James Earl] Jimmy Carter [Jr.] third, and I think [James Harrison] Gray [Sr.] was fourth and on down the line, Garland [Turk] Byrd, and others. Then in the run-off between Maddox and me I did not make a speech, as I recalled it. I never thought people would elect a man who did not believe in law and order and who campaigned with a pickax and ax handle and all that stuff [for] governor. But race hatred dies slowly and gradually, and Maddox won on the race issue. And incidentally, he and I are good friends now. When he and his wife [Hattie Virginia Cox Maddox] had their anniversary, Ruby [Hamilton McCord Arnall] and I went. We were the only former governor and First Lady there and he appreciated it. I've got his picture, he sent me of Virginia and him and the group and me all inscribed. So it is that things work peculiarly. But in the '66 campaign I had practically every newspaper in the state for me including television stations that had never taken part before. I remember WSB [TV, Atlanta, Georgia] was strong for me, and I thought it was just a foregone conclusion that I would win the run over against Maddox. One of the things that increased my yellow dog Democratic concept is that the Republicans invaded the Democratic runoff and voted for Maddox on the theory that he could—that [Howard Hollis (Bo)] Callaway could more easily defeat Maddox than me. And then you know the aftermath the write-in campaign and all the other stuff.

[End of Interview]

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