

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection

OH Vandiver 02

Herman Eugene Talmadge Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson at Senator Talmadge's home in Lovejoy, Georgia

Date: 08-26-93

Cassette #441 (31 Min. 42 Sec.)

EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Henderson: Good morning, Senator.

Talmadge: Good morning, Hal. Good to see you out so bright and early.

Henderson: Good to see you. Now I believe that this is about the fifth time that I've interviewed you, and they've always been a pleasure, and I'm looking forward to this one.

Talmadge: Thank you. I know it'd been several . . . the pleasure was mine.

Henderson: What I'd like to do today is to focus in on Governor Ernest Vandiver. You and he were close personal friends, still are close personal friends. At one time you were very close political allies. I'd like to first start with your personal relationship with Ernest Vandiver. When did you first come to know Ernest Vandiver?

Talmadge: I knew Ernest's father before I knew Ernest. I started managing my father's campaigns. The first one was in 1938, and S.E. [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver, Sr. of Lavonia, Georgia was one of my father's principal supporters. And we relied on him heavily in Franklin County and that section of the state. He was a man of substantial influence there, a well-known businessman, and he had influence in several of the counties in that area. I believe he served at one time on my father's highway board. I think I first knew Ernest during the 1946 campaign. Ernest, as I recall, introduced my father at a Gainesville rally, which was a very large rally. I think Edgar Dunlap, Sr. was in charge of the program up there. There was a huge crowd, many

thousands of people. And Ernest had just gotten out of the navy, out of the air force in World War II. He was a popular young veteran, and he introduced my father. And insofar as I know, that's the first time we personally became acquainted.

Henderson: Prior to the 1948 governor's race, what was the extent of his involvement with the Talmadge faction of Georgia politics?

Talmadge: Well, I'll have to repeat what I just stated. It was a family involvement. They were strong Talmadge people. Ernest's father was one of the principal Talmadge leaders in that area of the state, and Ernest had just finished the University of Georgia. And, incidentally, he was active in politics on the University of Georgia campus. He happened to be president of the Interfraternity Council, which was a job I held at the university in 1935 and '36. That seemed to be a training ground for politicians in Georgia. Ellis [Gibbs] Arnall was president of the Interfraternity Council. Vandiver was president of the Interfraternity Council. I was president of the Interfraternity Council. [Stephen] Steve Pace [Jr.] was president of the Interfraternity Council, and I don't know how many other Georgia politicians.

Henderson: In 1947 the legislature elects you governor. Did he play any role in your election by the legislature?

Talmadge: Well, I'm sure he did. All of our friends were actively soliciting the support of members of the General Assembly. I don't remember who was in the legislature from Franklin County at that time, but I'm sure the Vandiver family was very active in soliciting support for me in the General Assembly.

Henderson: Now, once you are elected, and you serve, I believe, for sixty-seven days before the Supreme Court says you should not have been elected, did he play any role in your administration?

Talmadge: I think I appointed him adjutant general, and he served that interim as adjutant general of the state. I'm not sure about that. I know I appointed him adjutant general after I was elected by the people, but generally the people that served with me during the time after the people elected me were also serving with me after the election by the General Assembly.

Henderson: You appointed him your campaign manager in the 1948 governor's race. Why did you select him?

Talmadge: For a number of reasons. He was new on the scene, not one of the old politicians. He was young. He was a war veteran, and he was connected to the Russell family. So, all of those factors influenced me to select Ernest.

Henderson: What does a campaign manager do? What did he do for your campaign in 1948?

Talmadge: Actually, the management of that campaign was somewhat dull. Roy [Vincent] Harris was in charge of political headquarters, the campaign headquarters downtown. And he was on the telephone constantly talking to politicians and Talmadge leaders, persuading every one he could to support me. And, of course, Ernest was involved in somewhat the same way, except he was scheduling speeches, procuring introducers, trying to organize political barbecues and get the biggest crowd possible, issuing press releases and copies of speeches, and all of those things.

Henderson: Did he play any role in your campaign of 1950?

Talmadge: I'm sure he did, but, having been adjutant general at the time, as I recall, he was not designated campaign manager. I don't remember who I designated campaign manager or whether I designated one at all or not.

Henderson: Beyond being your adjutant general, did he play any role in your administration or was he strictly adjutant general?

Talmadge: From time to time I called in all my department heads to discuss various problems, political and other things. I'm sure Ernest contributed as much as any other department head I had.

Henderson: Why do you think he wanted to be adjutant general?

Talmadge: Probably his experience in the air force, and he was interested in military matters. And being a general and commanding an army [is a] pretty prestigious thing.

Henderson: When did you become aware of the fact that he had higher political aspirations?

Talmadge: I guess when he talked to me about running for lieutenant governor. He was my adjutant general. And it was coming close to the expiration of my term. And another election was coming up, and [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.] was running to succeed me. And I'm sure Ernie probably talked to me about running [unintelligible] for lieutenant governor. I don't know exactly what time that occurred.

Henderson: Did you directly or indirectly help him with his campaign for lieutenant governor?

Talmadge: Yes.

Henderson: What was the extent of that involvement?

Talmadge: I passed the word throughout the state to my political friends and supporters to support Ernie Vandiver. At that time we had a quite influential organization in the state. Most of them looked to me for guidance and leadership.

Henderson: When he was elected lieutenant governor, did you ever seek to give him advice or counsel, or did he ever ask you for advice or counsel?

Talmadge: I don't recall. I'm sure at times we discussed matters generally, but what the discussion involved I don't remember.

Henderson: In 1958's legislative session, Governor Griffin proposes a fifty million dollar extension of the bond limit of the Rural Roads Authority. Lieutenant Governor Vandiver fought that increase. Did you play a role in the defeat of that bond increase? How active a role did you play?

Talmadge: I talked to some of my friends in the legislature, and they realized it was a political effort to try to trade roads for votes and defeat Vandiver, so the Talmadge organization was pretty unanimous in. . . .

Henderson: Did Lieutenant Governor Vandiver consult with you about strategies, how to best defeat this?

Talmadge: I remember when we talked about it. I don't know that it ever involved a strategy. We both knew the best strategy was to work like hell until you're done.

Henderson: Prior to this fight, the relationship between Governor Griffin and Lieutenant Governor Vandiver, I think, strained. What contributes to that strained relationship?

Talmadge: I don't know.

Henderson: Did you directly or indirectly advise or provide any assistance to his campaign for governor in 1958?

Talmadge: Yes. I passed the word all over the state to support Vandiver.

Henderson: How active a role did the leadership of the Talmadge faction or you play in his election?

Talmadge: Very active.

Henderson: In the campaign he makes the statement "no, not one." There was a great deal of discussion in the Vandiver camp about whether he should have made that statement. Did he consult with you prior to making that statement as to whether he should or should not?

Talmadge: He did not, but I called him after he made the statement and told him he was going too far.

Henderson: Why do you think he was going too far?

Talmadge: I knew that sooner or later probably the federal government would force a decision, and I knew we would have to decide whether we wanted to have schools or no schools, and I knew that we had to continue schools in Georgia regardless.

Henderson: Why do you think he made that statement?

Talmadge: Probably Bee [Walter Odum] Brooks wrote it in the statement, handed it to him, and he Okayed it.

Henderson: Now, who is this gentleman you're making reference to?

Talmadge: Bee Brooks was a boy from Telfair County and had served in World War II, about seven or eight years my junior, that had just gotten back from army intelligence in Southeast Asia and was a volunteer in the Talmadge campaign. When he started out 90 percent

of the stuff he wrote I had to throw in the trash basket. Inside six months he was the best political speechwriter in Georgia. He was a speechwriter for me; he was a speechwriter for Marvin Griffin; he was a speechwriter for Ernie Vandiver; and he was a speechwriter for Lester [Garfield] Maddox. He wrote inaugural addresses of all four of those governors and afterwards served with Sam [Shirling] Caldwell. He was one of the best political speechwriters I ever knew.

Henderson: Governor Vandiver has to deal with the desegregation crisis. There were some die-hard segregationists who preferred for the University of Georgia to be closed down completely rather than integrate. Did he ever consult with you prior to his decision about what his plan of action should be?

Talmadge: I don't know whether he did or not, but it was the most difficult decision probably any governor has had to make since the War Between the States. He made the proper decision, the only decision he could make really.

Henderson: At that time did you feel like it was the best decision he could make?

Talmadge: Yes.

Henderson: If he had sought your advice, would you have advised him as to that?

Talmadge: Yes, I would have.

Henderson: And you say he did not, though, consult with you prior to making that. . . .

Talmadge: I do not remember whether he consulted with me at all. I don't recall.

Henderson: All right. In 1960 the legislature creates the Sibley Committee, and one of recommendations of the Sibley Committee was local option. Did you have any difficulty with the local option recommendation?

Talmadge: I was in the Senate at that time and involved there, and I was not intimately involved with the Sibley Committee. I think Billy [William Redding] Bowdoin probably made that suggestion, and it was a good one. It let the people in Georgia talk about the situation and was an escape valve for a lot of them that would say "no, not one."

Henderson: Did Governor Vandiver at any time discuss with you the desegregation crisis in the public schools, and, if he did, what did you recommend that his course of action should be?

Talmadge: I don't remember. I'm sure we discussed it hundreds of times, but in what manner and whether he asked for a recommendation and whether I made one or not, I do not recall. It's been a long time.

Henderson: In your opinion, what are the major accomplishments of the Vandiver administration?

Talmadge: Restoring integrity in state government was probably the primary one, and, of course, he carried on, as did Marvin Griffin, policies that I had established and continued them, without the hints of fraud and corruption, either real or imagined, of the Griffin administration.

Henderson: In your opinion, what do you think are the major failures and shortcomings of his administration?

Talmadge: I don't recall at the moment; that's been a long time. I thought Vandiver made a good governor, far better than the average governor and better than most people thought he did. Vandiver was not a dynamic figure. He was not a great flaming orator, but he was a steady, solid, substantial, honorable citizen.

Henderson: How would you describe his style as governor? A weak governor? A strong governor? A decisive leader?

Talmadge: I think he was a strong governor. He, after he made up his mind on an issue, it was resolute. I'd have to say he was a strong governor.

Henderson: Would you consider him an astute politician?

Talmadge: No. He was not a flashy type, and he was not a dynamic political leader, but he was a solid sort of fellow like the man you wanted to be executor of your estate.

Henderson: How would you describe Ernest Vandiver the man? Was he fun to be around? Was he serious? Did he have a great sense of humor?

Talmadge: Moderately good sense of humor. He was serious and sometimes jovial, and it was a pleasure to be around him. I always took him to all the governor's conferences with me.

Henderson: He seeks the governorship in 1966 but has to withdraw because of a heart condition. Prior to withdrawing, he flies up to Washington to confer with you. Can you discuss that conversation he had with you?

Talmadge: He called me one time and said, "Senator, I want to see you." He checked his schedule, and we found the best time he would fly into Dulles--which was about an hour out from Washington--and get in early one morning. So I met him at Dulles Airport, and we came back to my residence which was in the District of Columbia at the time. As I recall we had breakfast there. It was before day when he arrived at Dulles. He told me his doctor had told him that if he ran for governor again, it would endanger his life. Said he had two small children and couldn't afford to make that sacrifice. He thought I was the proper man to come back and

run for governor and save the situation, so I considered it for about, close to a week, as I recall. I released a statement in the paper that I might do that, and it was in all the news media, and there was the strangest reaction I ever saw in Georgia politics. Almost every politician in the state, liberal, white, and black, said, "For God sakes come home and save us." And what we lawyers call the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, which is the rank and file of the people, their reaction was just exactly the opposite. They said, "You've just been in Washington long enough now to begin to have some influence. [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.] is not getting any younger, and we don't want two rookies in the Senate at the same time." So I decided not to run. And I received, I guess, telephones, telegrams, and letters, thousands of communications in a period of a few days.

Henderson: Why was he so insistent upon trying to get you in the race? You said to save the state. To save the state from what?

Talmadge: Well, probably to save the Talmadge organization was the proper [unintelligible].

Henderson: How would you describe Governor Vandiver's political philosophy? Conservative? Moderate?

Talmadge: I would say it was conservative.

Henderson: Did. . . .

Talmadge: He was frugal with the dollar. His daddy was frugal with the dollar. He was reared that way. He'd spend the state's money just like he would've his own, which was frugal.

Henderson: Was there, while he was in politics, and you were in politics, was there any major disagreement between the two of you that you can recall?

Talmadge: I don't recall any, no.

Henderson: Okay. Most of the time his philosophy reflected accurately your philosophy?

Talmadge: Yes, I'm sure it did. I'm sure there would be minor differences. I don't remember. But the governor has to make hundreds of decisions a day. No two men would make them exactly alike.

Henderson: Let me talk about the death of Senator Russell. In 1971 Senator Russell dies, and Governor [James (Jimmy) Earl] Carter [Jr.] appoints David [Henry] Gambrell to that position until the next general election. Did Senator Russell ever discuss with you who he would like to succeed him in the event of his death?

Talmadge: He did not.

Henderson: To the best of your knowledge, was there an understanding between Governor Carter and Senator Russell that if Russell died, Carter would appoint Vandiver to the Senate?

Talmadge: I've heard that rumor. I don't know whether it's true or not.

Henderson: Why do you think Governor Carter picked David Gambrell over Ernest Vandiver?

Talmadge: I don't know.

Henderson: Do you think politically it would've been an astute move if Governor Carter had appointed Governor Vandiver?

Talmadge: Yes.

Henderson: Why is that?

Talmadge: Well, Vandiver was popular, and he was tied to the Russell organization. Vandiver could have easily been reelected to the Senate had he been appointed.

Henderson: Did Governor Carter seek your advice on who he should appoint to the Senate when Senator Russell died?

Talmadge: No, he did not.

Henderson: If he had, would you have recommended Governor Vandiver? [Laughter] I think I know the answer to that.

Talmadge: I don't know, but I probably would have.

Henderson: Did you do any lobbying on behalf of getting Vandiver appointed to that position?

Talmadge: No, I knew that if Carter wanted my advice, he'd seek it. And if I tried to intervene, he'd think that it was meddling.

Henderson: Governor Vandiver enters the race in 1972. Did you directly or indirectly support his campaign?

Talmadge: No, I did not.

Henderson: Why is that?

Talmadge: Well, I'd had bad experience supporting governors. And my colleague at that time was--what was the lawyer's name? That Carter appointed?

Henderson: Gambrell?

Talmadge: Yeah, Gambrell. The Gambrell family had been friends of mine, his father and David. We were serving together in the Senate, and I didn't participate in the campaign one way or another.

Henderson: So you did not offer any suggestions or advice to Governor Vandiver on how to run his campaign?

Talmadge: No, I did not.

Henderson: At first, the expectation is that Senator Gambrell and Governor Vandiver would be in a run-off. And the governor comes in behind Gambrell and Sam [Samuel Augustus] Nunn [Jr.]. Why do you think Governor Vandiver's campaign failed?

Talmadge: Most ex-governors have difficulty mounting a campaign after they leave office. My father was the exception to the rule. He could, uh, everybody thought he was dead [politically]. When he was defeated twice and then came back. I don't know who was managing the campaign for Vandiver, and I was not involved in it, so I really don't have the answer to that.

Henderson: Let me try another question. Why do you think little-known Sam Nunn was able to get into the run-off?

Talmadge: Well, one slogan he had--I don't know who thought it up--[was] "get tough in Washington." That probably had more to do with it than anything else. Everyone was mad with Washington.

Henderson: Your father ran against Senator Russell in 1936, and Governor Vandiver married Senator Russell's niece. Did that ever cause any difficulties with you and Ernest Vandiver?

Talmadge: No, none at all. By that time the Russell family was supporting me, and I was, of course, supporting Dick.

Henderson: What do you think is the place of Ernest Vandiver in Georgia history? How will he be remembered?

Talmadge: I think he'll be remembered as a good governor, an honest man, who faced a very critical decision and met it with strength and courage and fortitude.

Henderson: In looking back over your experience with, your relationship with Governor Vandiver, is there any humorous incident that took place where he was involved?

Talmadge: I'm sure there was, Hal, [laughter] but I don't remember at this point.

Henderson: Well, Senator, these are all the questions that I have for you. I want to thank you for this interview. It's always been a pleasure.

Talmadge: You're welcome, Hal, the pleasure's mine.

Henderson: Thank you very much.

End of Side One

END OF INTERVIEW

Name Index

- 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
Vandiver, Samuel Ernest, Sr., 1, 2
- A**
- Arnall, Ellis G., 2
- B**
- Bowdoin, William Redding (Billy), 8
Brooks, Walter Odum (Bee), 6
- C**
- Caldwell, Shirling (Sam), 7
Carter, James Earl, Jr. (Jimmy), 11, 12
- D**
- Dunlap, Edgar, Sr., 1
- G**
- Gambrell, David Henry, 11, 12, 13
Griffin, Samuel Marvin, Sr., 4, 5, 7, 8
- H**
- Harris, Roy Vincent, 3
- M**
- Maddox, Lester Garfield, 7
- N**
- Nunn, Samuel Augustus, Jr., 13
- P**
- Pace, Stephen, Jr. (Steve), 2
- R**
- Russell, Richard Brevard, Jr., 10, 11, 12, 13
- T**
- Talmadge, Eugene, 1
- V**
- Vandiver, Samuel Ernest, Jr., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5,



Richard B. Pinner
Library for Political Research and Studies