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OH Vandiver 03

Carl Edward Sanders Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson at Governor Sanders' law office in Atlanta

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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Henderson: Governor, I think this is my third interview with you, and they've always been enjoyable, and I appreciate you granting me this one. And with this interview I would like to focus in on the career of Ernest Vandiver and your relationship with Mr. Vandiver, Governor Vandiver. You were in the State Senate during the Vandiver administration. What do you see as the major accomplishments of his administration?

Sanders: I think his honesty in government program, as it was called, is probably the greatest accomplishment.

Henderson: Looking back on it do you see any major failures of the Vandiver administration?

Sanders: Well, I think the honesty in government was his greatest shining hour. I think probably the weakest part of the administration was after we got into all of the integration, the racial things, I thought that Ernie Vandiver had an opportunity to really do something dramatic and accept what was happening and take advantage of it, take control of it, and he never did that.

He got right down to the last great speech into the joint session, and I was hoping, like some other people, that he would, you know, say some things that would calm some of these

turbulent waters that were being created at that time. He came close, but he just never would quite make that break from the past.

Henderson: If you had been giving that speech, what would you have said that he didn't say?

Sanders: I would have said the law of the land makes it necessary now that we accept and go forward in this state with whatever it takes in order to do the things that will protect and preserve education and will give this state the impetus and the momentum to move forward into a new era. Ernie never said that-wouldn't. And it was, I think it was just because, I think he wanted to, but he was a product of a different type of political era, for instance, than I was.

He came up through the Talmadge machine. He was sort of handpicked. He managed Herman [Eugene] Talmadge's campaign initially and then became the adjutant general. And then he was, you know, back in those days, Roy [Vincent] Harris and Herman Talmadge and a half a dozen others and maybe Mr. Hughes Spalding over here at King and Spalding, they'd meet in a hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, under the county unit system and they would decide who was going to be the governor and who was going to be various and sundry other elected officials. And Ernie was the beneficiary of that type of organization. Having run, managed Herman's campaign and being the nephew of Senator [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.] and all, he had great credentials in addition to being a, a very attractive young man himself with a military record and all of that, so he never really had a tough campaign that I know of in the entire political career.

The toughest campaign he had was against Bill [William Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.] of Ty Ty, Georgia, which, of course, is down near your neck of the woods, and that was an

absolute slam dunk, but even in that campaign Roy Harris and two or three others got him to make that crazy speech about no, not one, not ever one, which was the craziest thing I ever heard of.

Henderson: So you look upon that statement as a mistake as far as. . . .

Sanders: Oh, I thought it was a terrible mistake.

Henderson: Why do you think he made that statement?

Sanders: I think that those people who had sort of been his mentors just got to him, and I think he, in order to just sort of appease them, he put that in there as a sort of a sop. I don't think that he honest to God really thought that Bill Bodenhamer had a chance of really beating him. But that was, you know, back in those times, when they delivered the county courthouses, I guess, you know, they ran the state. And, of course, when Herman [Talmadge] was elected, after his father died, Roy Harris and two or three others, they were the ones that ran the state of Georgia.

Herman eventually got out, I think, from under sort of, some of their total domination and became a good governor, but the first two or three years that he was in office, when they sort of put him in there and then they, you know, [Melvin Ernest] M. E. Thompson, they went through that rigmarole. After the first two or three years, Herman had a terrible problem. He got to the problem back then, as everybody knows. It's public record that, you know, he became almost a total alcoholic, and I think it was because he didn't have anything to do and didn't know exactly then what he was doing. He'd never been elected to anything, and they put him in there, and they pulled the strings, and they ran the state.

Henderson: You have had the privilege of being one of Georgia's governors. Looking back at Governor Vandiver, what do you see as the strength of his being governor and the weaknesses? Was he a strong governor? Was he a weak governor? Was he a great leader? Did he have charisma? How would you evaluate Vandiver as a governor?

Sanders: I think Ernie Vandiver was a strong governor in the sense that he had, I believe, the right principles of honesty and morality in government. And he was very, very strong when it came to such things as people trying to take advantage of the government, through corruption, and things of that kind.

So far as being a charismatic leader, I don't think he fell into that category. Ernie is a Dutchman, and he's stubborn, hardheaded. He's honest, and I think he's able. I don't think, you know, he'd never really practiced law, although he was a lawyer. I don't think he had ever, you know, really been out on his own and had to maybe scratch and scramble for and build a career like maybe some of the others of us had done. He grew up as the son of a prominent landowner in northeast Georgia. He had, he married into a very strong political family, and so he had a lot of the benefits of being almost spoon-fed as he moved into that career that many other people in politics never had.

His programs that he advocated and the things that he fought for, like we had the big rural roads fight, and we had all of these, I mean terrible fights I thought were on the high road. I thought, far as I was concerned, that Ernie Vandiver always climbed the high road in his political activities. I never saw him engage in any kind of skullduggery or any kind of dishonest, disreputable activity. But he was a captive of, and sort of a part of, a political group that exercised great influence over his actions and deeds.

If you'll go back, and during the latter part of his administration, and look at all those crazy bills that were introduced, which I and others, as part of his administration, were carrying out, we were advocating, or he was advocating, that we secede from the union in a position which was virtually a secession from the United States--private schools, all kinds of, shut down the public school system, do away with those kind of things, you know, set up private schools and things of that kind. And, you know, in hindsight, when you think about it, it's ludicrous, but that was the road and that was the thrust of, most of the state government at that point. There was a meeting out at the mansion one night where we had the whole administration leadership out there. And there was two of us who begged and pleaded with him not to go forward with some of this crazy stuff, and there was Frank [Starling] Twitty of Camilla [Georgia] and myself. And in that instance, I've forgotten what it was, but it was about some of this racial stuff, he listened, but otherwise everybody else in the administration said to hell with it, we'll shut down the schools and we'll secede from the Union, and you know, we'll fight till the last drop.

And Twitty and I, who'd been out, I think that year, on this Chamber of Commerce tour and had been going around the state talking about some of these things, said you can't do that; don't, don't do that. Now he did set up that Sibley Commission and got Mr. [John Adams] Sibley out there to try to defuse and calm down some of the things, and I thought that was a very positive thing.

But he was ambivalent; he was torn between what these people that had sort of brought him along politically and who had dominated his political thinking, I think he was torn between how can I go against that and at the same time I know that I need to do something further over

here but that's so unknown and so completely dangerous that I just don't know whether I can do that. I think Ernie's basically a conservative individual, politically and otherwise.

Henderson: You mentioned the Sibley Commission. What was the purpose of the Sibley Commission?

Sanders: To defuse some of the, the turmoil that was in the state and also hopefully, I think, to create some type of mechanism to meet what had to be done eventually with the schools. And I think at that point it was a commission that was buying time; it was something to buy some time to allow people to come into the places in the state where Mr. Sibley went and get things off of their chests and to allow that. And Mr. Sibley was a very distinguished, very highly respected individual. I think everybody knew that, number one, he wasn't going to fly off the handle and make some irresponsible statements and all, and, number two, nobody was going to jump him as an individual because he was not a politician. He was strictly a banker and a highly respected, civic-minded individual in our state.

Henderson: Let me go back to Governor Vandiver as a politician. What are some ways or methods or how did he encourage the legislators to vote for his programs?

Sanders: Well, he didn't have to do a lot of that back then because the governor back then, as well as when I was in there, had such enormous power in the sense that he was able to select the leaders, the committee chairmen, pretty much the speaker of the House, and in other fashions control or sort of dominate the lieutenant governor that it was not too difficult to motivate the members of the General Assembly to vote for your bills.

Henderson: Now, there's been some charges that governors would trade roads and things like that. Did Governor Vandiver engage in that kind of politics?

Sanders: Not that I remember, no. I think, I think, no. When you say trade roads, oh, I think there's always, at that time and era a governor would certainly, probably have a much closer working relationship with the director of the highway department, who happened to be Mr. Jim [James Lester] Gillis [Sr.], than maybe the governor today has with Frank Shackleford over there, Wayne Shackleford, who has probably got a much more independent board, which I happen to have created in order to. . . . Back then you had a three-man highway board, and they were all strictly appointed and dominated by the governor, and he could have a lot of influence on the roads. When you say "trade roads," I never felt like Vandiver or anybody else went out here and just blatantly traded roads, but everybody in the General Assembly knew that the governor was, if not all-powerful, he was very, very powerful, and so, you know, it was easier to sit somebody down in the office and explain bills to them and get them to vote for it.

Henderson: Now, you served as his floor leader in the Senate.

Sanders: I did.

Henderson: How did that come about? Now, what did you do as a floor leader?

Sanders: Oh, I carried his legislative program. I mean, I was his spokesman, and I took the bills, the governor's program, bills, and I presented them, and I spoke on them, and I, you know, I never lost a bill that I know of.

Henderson: Did he personally pick you for that position?

Sanders: He personally picked me for that position. I had supported Ernie Vandiver when he was, I believe, when he ran for lieutenant governor. I was a practicing lawyer down in Augusta. I then, of course, later, when he was lieutenant governor, I was elected to the House of Representatives, and I served in the House of Representatives. And 'course I got to know

him, and he got to know me. And then I was elected to the Senate. Back then the Senate rotated, as you know. I was fortunate in that I served three straight terms in the Senate, which up until that time nobody had ever done except Fulton County, where they had a permanent senator. Everybody else had to rotate. But I served, I represented Jefferson, Glascock, and Richmond County, and I was able to get Glascock and Jefferson County to waive their right and allow me to serve three sessions. So I became the floor leader and subsequently became the president pro tem of the Senate.

Henderson: Let me go to probably one of the big fights in the Vandiver administration. In the 1958 legislative session, Governor [Samuel Marvin] Griffin [Sr.] proposes to increase the bond limit of the Rural Roads Authority.

Sanders: Rural Roads Authority. Yeah.

Henderson: Now Lieutenant Governor Vandiver then led the fight against that. What is all that about? Why such a big. . .

Sanders: Well, that was really the governor's race for the next governor, that's what it was all about. Griffin was going to issue a hundred million dollars' worth of rural road bonds and his protégés and his highway department and all that was going to pass that money out to friends and to supporters, and that was going to be, that was really the initial battle for the next governor's race. And, of course, at that time, his chairman of his highway board, or department, was a fellow named Roger [Hugh] Lawson [Sr.], I believe it was, and he was touted to be Griffin's next, Griffin's protégé, successor in the governor's thing, and Vandiver, of course, knew that; we all knew that, and we knew what it was all about. We knew instead of getting a good road, they'd get a little grease and gravel and that was going to be it.

So Vandiver set up the, I believe it was called the watchdog committee, which I was a member of; Bill [William Perry] Trotter down here at Lagrange, and I've forgotten who else, two or three others on it; maybe [Curtis] Dixon Oxford may have. . . . Dixon was a revenue. . . no, that was lieutenant governor. I guess Dixon Oxford may have been on it. But anyway, we served on the watchdog committee. And we had a brouhaha; I mean the battle was fought over keeping that program from taking place, and we won the battle. He won the battle with us, those of us on the watchdog committee. It became a big public fight and it was highly publicized, and, in effect, we defeated it.

And that in effect, in my opinion, absolutely won the governor's race because they couldn't get anybody then without that kind of money having been spread around among friends; they couldn't get anybody of any great stature to run, so they finally came up with Bill Bodenhamer, Reverend Bodenhamer from Ty Ty, Georgia, who had been a member of the House, had been a strong Marvin Griffin supporter.

Henderson: When Vandiver runs for governor in '58, do you assist in any way with his campaign?

Sanders: I supported him, yeah. But when you say assist, I supported him totally in his campaign for governor. But I was not assigned or not--I didn't take up camp at the headquarters and spend the . . . 'cause I think I was running for the Senate at the same time. I was in my own campaign at the same time. But we carried my section of Georgia and carried Richmond County and everything else for him.

Henderson: Let me come back to the desegregation. . . .

Sanders: You know, what you need to do, I think, to get, to get the proper perspective on some of that rural roads stuff and all that? In addition to talking to me and other people like me, you need to talk to people like Denmark Groover [Jr.], who was Marvin Griffin's floor leader in the House, who's still in the General Assembly over there, and maybe somebody like [Edwards] Culver Kidd [Jr.], who lives in Atlanta now, who was sort of on the other side, maybe [Robert Alwyn] Cheney Griffin [laughter] down in Bainbridge who definitely was on the other side. You might get a little different flavor from some of this.

Henderson: I would imagine I would. Yes. Let me go back to this desegregation crisis. And you've already alluded to this and talked about this some. When he makes a decision eventually not to close down the schools, do you think that hurts him politically in the state?

Sanders: No. I think that would have established, if he had done it very openly and very emphatically with a great deal of reasoning behind it, I think that would have established a much greater place in history for Ernie politically and otherwise, if he had done it. I think, 'course at the time, I think he thought that it would absolutely hurt him. And maybe he had in the backside of his mind, 'cause I think it becomes evident later on in his career that one day somehow he was going to succeed Dick Russell in the United States Senate. And also at one point, you know, there was a big, back there when [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy first got elected, there was a big furor that he was going to be the secretary of the army or some position up there. That never did happen either, but maybe Ernie had that all in the backside of his, not the army thing, but the, uh, Russell thing. And that's why maybe he never quite stood up and made that emphatic.

That was the thing that everybody told me that I had completely committed political suicide, when I went around the state with Frank Twitty on that Chamber thing. And that was in the middle of all that, maybe in '60 or '61. I concluded, and I took the position that we could not close the public schools. And all my political friends, and I was not a part of that machinery, although I was part of Vandiver's administration. I'd never been a part; Roy Harris lived in Augusta, same place as I did, and he and I had always been sort of on the opposite side of the political fence.

But I took the position that, you know, we had to accept integration and we had to move on with our, keep our public schools open. We couldn't have a generation of illiterates. And they said, "Well, you just absolutely have cut your throat politically from ear to ear. You have absolutely destroyed your political career." And it turned out the people of this state were much further ahead of the politicians. They knew you couldn't shut down public education.

But Ernie was sort of torn to a much greater extent than I was because I didn't have Roy Harris as my mentor or some of those people on my back. And they took this great, great credit, you know, for saying, "Well, we put you in these offices. We made you what you were, and you can't turn on us."

Henderson: You mentioned Roy Harris. Governor Vandiver appointed him to the Board of Regents.

Sanders: And I took him off. [Laughter]

Henderson: I take it you were not involved in this appointment then. [Laughter]

Sanders: No, I wasn't involved. Roy Harris came to me after I got elected governor. I always got along with him fine, but he came to me and said, "You know, Carl," he said--that's

when he wanted to be reappointed to the Board of Regents; I appointed Billy [William Shivers] Morris down there, who'd been; his father got in a fist-fight with Roy Harris when they were in the legislature years ago--and he said, "You know, I really helped you get elected governor." I said, "Tell me about that, Roy." [Laughter] He said, "Well, by me being on the other side, being out there like I was," said, "I got you more votes than you'd have gotten otherwise."

Henderson: In 1962 you run for the governorship against Marvin Griffin. Did Governor Vandiver support you in that campaign?

Sanders: Yes, after a while. [Laughter] He was committed to Garland [Turk] Byrd, and 'course I started out running for lieutenant governor. And my opponent for lieutenant governor was his executive secretary, Peter Zack Geer [Jr.], and he was absolutely, had pretty well committed to support Peter Zack Geer in that lieutenant governor's race 'cause Peter Zack was another member of that clique. And that didn't sit too well with me, but there wasn't anything I could do about it because I, you know, I didn't have any choice. So anyway, that was that.

Then they got smart. I say "they"; I don't mean Ernie, but some of Peter Zack's friends got smart, and they put a lawyer up here in Atlanta in the race for lieutenant governor named Carl F. Sanders. That pretty well made it impossible for me to stay in the lieutenant governor's race with a Carl E. [Edward] and a Carl F., and so, when they did that, then I said, "Okay, if that's the way y'all are going to play I'm going to run for governor." Well, when I decided to run for governor, then oh, my god, everything busted loose. People started coming to see me telling me, "We've got the county all fixed for you for lieutenant governor, but you can't get out of that race and run for governor 'cause we can't carry the county." I said, "Well, it's too late for that."

Well, I went to see Ernie, and I knew when I went down there that, you know, he was over here on Garland Byrd's team. But he did it--I say this in retrospect--he did it, I think, not because he disliked me 'cause we got along fine. But politics--you've written enough about politics to understand--he did it because he was scared to death that Marvin Griffin would get elected. And he felt like that Garland Byrd had a hell of a lot better chance of beating Marvin Griffin than Carl Sanders. And he couldn't stand to think about, after all the things that he'd done to Marvin Griffin [laughter] during his term as lieutenant governor, all those fights that we'd been in, I'm sure he was petrified that if Marvin Griffin got elected, Marvin would have spent the next four years just like they spent two years trying to indict Marvin and all of his people; he'd have spent four years trying to just do anything he could to besmirch and destroy Vandiver personally and his administration. So anyway, he supported Garland Byrd.

Well, after Garland had his infamous heart attack and got out of the governor's race, he supported me and supported me, I guess, as strongly as he could. But that was, you know, I'd organized my campaign and I was, had gotten my campaign manager, my financial thing, and everything else. At that point, you know, he still didn't want Marvin Griffin. He wanted Carl Sanders, and I was grateful that he did want me then. I was glad to have his support.

Henderson: What accounted for the split between Governor Marvin Griffin and Lieutenant Governor Ernest Vandiver? They were both coming from the same political camp.

Sanders: I know they were. Well, it's just what I said. What accounted for the split was that Marvin Griffin, though, did not choose to have Ernie Vandiver become governor. He wanted his own protégé, whoever that might be, and Vandiver, of course, was anxious to become governor. At that point Herman Talmadge was in Washington, and it kind of split up

over this, a lot of this corruption that was in there. It was a lot of corruption in Marvin's administration, and Ernie Vandiver didn't like that any more than I liked it or anybody else. And they were doing things, you know, that they shouldn't be doing. They were taking the state's tax money and just absolutely using it like it was their money.

Henderson: Okay, let's go to the '66 campaign. Governor Vandiver seeks reelection, but he has to drop out because of health conditions.

Sanders: Yeah.

Henderson: Did you support him prior to the time that he dropped out?

Sanders: Yeah, I supported him. In fact, I was going through my lock box the other day trying to find a bond, and I found a, which is interesting, there's an affidavit in there signed by Jim Gillis. And why I don't know, but Ernie Vandiver had signed it saying that if he got elected in '66, that he would appoint me to the United States Senate, if Dick Russell, you know, went down for health reasons. It's in my lock box. [Laughter] Signed by Mr. Gillis present and witnessed the conversation.

Henderson: That's an interesting revelation.

Sanders: Yeah.

Henderson: Well, let's see. In 1970 you seek the governor's office.

Sanders: Yep.

Henderson: Did Governor Vandiver support you in that campaign?

Sanders: Not to my . . . no, he didn't. He didn't. He supported Jimmy [James Earl] Carter [Jr.] because Jimmy Carter had promised him that he would appoint him to the United States Senate if Dick Russell retired or died, and I didn't do that. And he'll tell you that. I think

you're familiar with that. And I think that, to this day, he's apologized to me many times for not supporting me in 1970 and said he made one of the biggest political mistakes of his life when he believed what Jimmy Carter told him about the United States Senate.

Henderson: When Senator Russell dies, Governor Carter appoints David [Henry] Gambrell to fill that position. Why do you think he didn't pick Ernest Vandiver?

Sanders: I don't know. I tell you that to me is a mystery to me. I have no idea because I wasn't a part of that conversation, and I really don't know unless David Gambrell and his father had put a lot of money into Carter's campaign. And I'm sure Ernie, who probably put a lot of political effort, probably didn't put a whole lot of money. I mean, Ernie is known to be careful how he spends his money. Not that I think that's a bad trait. I think he doesn't throw it around in political campaigns or anything else.

Henderson: When he runs in '72, do you support his campaign?

Sanders: In '72? What was he running for?

Henderson: For the Senate.

Sanders: No, I supported Sam [Samuel Augustus] Nunn [Jr.]. I put Norman Underwood, and we, and Norman Underwood, after Sam got in there, sort of took over and ran his campaign.

Henderson: There's a lot of speculation that it's going to be a run-off between David Gambrell and Ernest Vandiver. Then all of a sudden Sam Nunn comes--gets the second position. What happens to Ernest Vandiver's campaign?

Sanders: I don't know what happened to Ernest Vandiver's campaign. I think at that point, you know, Ernie, as I said, if you go back to the 60s and you see some of the events that

were taking place and some of the positions that he took and all. . . . I think at that point the times had changed. I think people had concluded that his type of political leadership was somewhat passé, and I think people were looking for, and people concluded that they wanted a new fresh type of political leadership. And I think that's just what happened to him.

I think he may not have realized it like most politicians don't realize it, including myself. And at least I concluded that after I got through with my '70 race with Jimmy Carter. You know, most politicians never know when to quit, and I think that Ernie went on a couple of times too long, and just like a lot of boxers do--I think they just keep trying to get back in the ring.

I just think that it was more of a new group of voters, a whole new look on what kind of representation we wanted in Washington. And I don't think there was anything personal about any of his previous positions in government; I just think that people felt like that it was time for some new leadership.

Henderson: What do you think when the history of Georgia is written the place of Ernest Vandiver will be in that history?

Sanders: That he was an honest governor and that he did an honest job. That's what I think. I think he did a good honest job. I don't think he took any great risk, political risk, and I don't think he felt like he had to. And I think when he had an opportunity to really become a leader by taking some positions that were considered to be bold and unproven at the time, he chose not to do that. But I think basically his administration was honest, and it was progressive in the sense of the times that we were living in then.

Henderson: Governor, I want to thank you for this interview. It has been most enlightening, and I appreciate it very much.

Sanders: I'll look forward to reading your book.

End of Side One

Postscript

Henderson: Governor, one other question comes up. There's a battle during Governor Vandiver's administration that's called the battle of the budget. Would you discuss that?

Sanders: Well, that happened . . . I believe it was 1960 or '61. At that time the leadership in the House was George L. [Leon] Smith [II], the Speaker; Jack [Bowdoin] Ray was a leader, Frank Twitty was a floor leader; and I forgot who the chairman of the so-called Ways and Means Committee was.

But they, while Vandiver was on vacation with his family in Florida, they took, I guess it was the Appropriation Bill, and they stripped the governor of his power, and his appointment as director of the budget, which would have, in effect, taken all of the financial authority away from the governor's office and put it into the hands of the General Assembly. They passed the bill and sent it over to the Senate, and at that time Henry [Getzen] Neal was working for the governor as his legal assistant. He got in touch with the governor. We then formulated a defense for him over in the Senate and fought the battle of the budget in the Senate and defeated the House's provisions, sent it back over to the House.

At that point he had to appoint, select Charlie [Charles Adams] Pannell of Chatsworth, Georgia, because his floor leader and his speaker and all had left him. He had to appoint

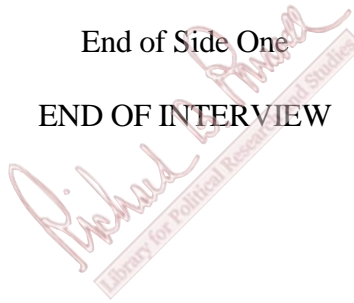
Charlie Pannell to help lead the fight over there to put the provision back into the bill that would retain his power as director of the budget.

That was a very serious political fight, and his whole top leadership of his administration in the House just absolutely abandoned him. And I never have quite understood why they did it, but if it hadn't been for some of us in the Senate, he would have been a toothless tiger for the rest of his term.

Henderson: Thank you.

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