

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection
OH Vandiver 05A
Peter Zack Geer, Jr. Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson (Part A)
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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON AND MR. GEER

Side One

Henderson: This is Dr. Hal Henderson. I'm interviewing former Lieutenant Governor Peter Zack Geer, Jr., in his law office in Albany [Georgia] on November 3, 1993. Good afternoon, Governor.

Geer: Good afternoon.

Henderson: Glad to be with you this afternoon.

Geer: Glad to be with you.

Henderson: Let me begin by asking you questions about Governor [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver [Jr.]. I understand that you were his executive secretary.

Geer: I was indeed.

Henderson: And before we get into that relationship with him, could you discuss your relationship with Governor Vandiver before you became his executive secretary?

Geer: Yes, I served in the legislature as representative from Miller county, Georgia, which is my home county where I was born and reared, in the '53-'54 session of the General Assembly. I was the baby member of the General Assembly, the youngest. I think I was twenty-three years old, the best I recall.

Herman [Eugene] Talmadge was governor. It was his last two years as governor. Ernest Vandiver was the adjutant general for Governor [Herman] Talmadge, and I knew him. I knew, of course, that he had married Senator [Richard Brevard] Russell's [Jr.] niece. His

brother-in-law, Bobby [Robert Lee] Russell [Jr.], was in the House with me, and Bobby and I were friends, and we later became extremely close friends. So I knew Governor Vandiver and in the '54 campaign. . . . Do you want me to lead on in, or you want to mention that '54 campaign?

Henderson: Why don't we stick right now to just your relationship up to being executive secretary?

Geer: All right. I knew General Vandiver, Governor Vandiver, at that time. I did not know him extremely well, except that I knew him, and I had great respect for him. And everybody that knew him had great respect for him. We had in common [that] we were both Talmadge men. My daddy was a Talmadge man. Ernie Vandiver's daddy, [Samuel] Ernest Vandiver, Sr., was a Talmadge man. He'd been on Gene [Eugene] Talmadge's highway board, as I recall. We had that in common. He was ten, twelve years older than I was, but he was a young man, and I knew him well enough to have a great respect for him and to be on a first name and friendly basis with him. That's about the size of it.

Henderson: Okay. Now let's go to the '54 race, when he runs for lieutenant governor. Are you involved in that campaign in any way?

Geer: I supported him. As I recall. . . . 'Course, I knew that Governor Talmadge was for Vandiver. Billy [William K.] Barrett, who was director of the veteran's administration under Talmadge, ran for lieutenant governor, and 'course you had two Talmadge men running, Governor Vandiver and Billy Barrett. It was between the two candidates; there was no comparison. Barrett was a very personable fellow but he had no business being lieutenant governor. Ernie was of a caliber that should have been, and I was for him. So was Herman

Talmadge.

And I was, at that time, I was very young and I was a Talmadge follower. I was and still am. I supported him [Vandiver]. I did not go all over the state supporting him. I supported him in southwest Georgia and primarily in my home county. I had a second cousin, who'd been at Georgia with Ernie, that lived in Colquitt, Georgia, and he sort of took the lead for Ernie. But I was for him and my political crowd was for him, and he carried my county.

Henderson: Now, who was this gentlemen you're making. . . .

Geer: Jimmy [James M.] Fudge [Jr.], Jimmy Fudge. They were both Phi Delts [Phi Delta Theta] at Georgia and went to school together. Jimmy was very strong for him. He didn't have any political scars. He took the lead and it worked out fine, worked out fine.

Henderson: Is he still alive?

Geer: Yes, he is. He lives in Colquitt, Georgia, now.

Henderson: You said that Governor Talmadge was supportive of Mr. Vandiver. Did he play an active role in that campaign?

Geer: Behind the scenes. Talmadge, at that time, Herman Talmadge was the strongest politician that had ever lived in Georgia, before or since. He could pick the phone up, turn a county around on its hind legs. And I'm sure that he did what he could without being too obvious with it for Ernie Vandiver. It was generally known that he was for Vandiver.

Henderson: While he is lieutenant governor, are you in the legislature? Are you in positions where you can see him presiding over the state senate? In other words, what kind of lieutenant governor was he?

Geer: He was an excellent lieutenant governor. Ernie has good bearing about him. He's a

very strong person. He was a very handsome young man, had a deep, resonant voice. He looked good. He had an open face. He looked like honesty personified and he was, he was. He had a good relationship in the Senate and got along very well with the senators and presided, extremely well, extremely well.

Henderson: Was there ever a problem--he is relatively young, presiding over the Senate, and some of these senators were a little up in age. Was there ever an age problem there?

Geer: No.

Henderson: Never.

Geer: No, no.

Henderson: Is he the type of person that can come, when he walks into a room, he sort of takes charge of that room? Did he sort of take charge of the Senate? Was he that kind of personality?

Geer: I would say that he exuded that sort of leadership, yes. I think he had that sort of bearing, very much so.

Henderson: While he is lieutenant governor, [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.] is governor, and their relationship--would you discuss their relationship?

Geer: Well, it started off rather congenially. They both--Marvin Griffin basically ran as a Talmadge candidate, so they were a lot of Talmadge friends running. Herman Talmadge was somewhat on the spot in that race, but he fundamentally was for Marvin in the end. So they came from a similar springboard politically. Vandiver, of course, had, in addition, to the Talmadge organization, he was married to Dick Russell's niece, and, of course, Senator Russell was then and always had been a very powerful figure in Georgia, very highly respected, as you

know. I'm saying this for the record. I know you know that.

But anyway, he was, and, of course, Betty [Sybil Elizabeth] Russell Vandiver was a very personable woman, a good politician, and these Russell people are loyal to the Russell name. You didn't hear much from them until the time came. They would come out of the woodwork [unintelligible]. And Ernie had that plus the Talmadge background and plus being an able candidate, having served as adjutant general, he knew people from that position all over Georgia. 'Cause everybody been--you got somebody in the National Guard.

He also had been manager of one . . . of the first Herman Talmadge campaign in 1948. Ernest Vandiver was campaign manager. He was a young mayor of Lavonia, Georgia, and had been in the air force. He was a veteran; he looked good; he was young; he didn't have the manner on him of the back room politician with the cigar, and Herman made a wise choice in naming him campaign manager. And he had that experience of having to run a statewide campaign. So he had a good organization to start with.

Henderson: You've triggered a question as you were talking about him being adjutant general. How does being adjutant general help one run for the lieutenant governorship?

Geer: Well, it's an interesting thing, if I may digress a little bit, Marvin Griffin was adjutant general once. I don't know whether you knew that or not. He was adjutant general under Ellis [Gibbs] Arnall, as I recall. The adjutant general, as I said, you've got National Guardsmen all over Georgia, and they're kin to everybody all over Georgia, and you're called upon to speak all over the state as adjutant general at all sort of civic clubs and all sort of functions. And the adjutant general of Georgia traditionally held a great position of respect, probably more than now. You start off with a prestige position and then being able to travel all over the state and

speak and meet people, plus your guardsmen. And if you're active politically, you can get your guardsmen to invite you to that county, get something set up for you to speak, and that just gives you a good springboard. It does. It did then.

Henderson: Right. Let me go back to the relationship between Marvin Griffin and Ernest Vandiver. What do you think contributed to the deterioration of their relationship?

Geer: That has always been inherent [jealousy], or since we've had a lieutenant governor-- Marvin was the first lieutenant governor of Georgia that ever served as such. He and Herman Talmadge got along all right, but there was a little jealousy there. That's inherent in that office and the office of governor. Part of that, and then, as I recall, some of Marvin's friends around the state were sort of, some of [them] were anti-Vandiver [and] probably fueled that fire between them.

Then eventually Governor Griffin's administration got into some difficulties. I never did think Marvin Griffin did anything illegal [or was] a crooked person, and I still do not. I thought he was an honorable man. Some of his friends did some things that were not prudent, that might have been illegal. Vandiver did not like that sort of conduct, and when that started in the Griffin administration Vandiver began to pull away. He began to pull away from the Griffin position.

Then ultimately some of Marvin's friends skated around trying to get up opposition to Vandiver running for governor. And, of course, you don't run for governor just [as an upstart]. You run, you start way ahead of time. I don't think Marvin ever had too much to do with that. I think he was too skillful to do that. I think he understood the state too much to really get that deep. I think that Marvin probably allowed his crowd to start threatening Vandiver with

opposition, maybe to try to keep Vandiver off of him. I'm not sure but I suspect that was in his mind.

Roger [Hugh] Lawson [Sr.] was chairman of the [state] Highway Board, chairman of the Rural Roads Authority. Roger was from Hawkinsville and a very fine man. He'd been solicitor general, district attorney of his circuit, and had been in the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. His son is a judge over there now, [Roger] Hugh Lawson, Jr. Roger got to running for governor against Ernie. Ernie was lieutenant governor, and that's when the schism really became wide open. I was attorney for the Rural Roads Authority under Griffin. It was not a full-time job. I didn't live in Atlanta, but I attended the meetings. And when the rural roads fight came the schism really became wide open. It was a bare knuckles fight.

Ernie had asked me to come to the legislature in the '58 session as his aide, getting ready to run for governor. And I came, and I didn't know anything about any proposal for a fifty million dollar bond issue, and I was the attorney for the authority. [Laughter] So when that issue came I resigned as attorney for the authority, and, of course, stuck with Vandiver on the issue. We may be getting ahead of [unintelligible].

Henderson: That's fine. Go right ahead.

Geer: That, the battle really became wide open at that time. And Vandiver won that battle, and when he did the governor's race was over. It was over. They never could mount a strong candidate against him, and I don't think Marvin Griffin . . . probably never intended to really run somebody against Vandiver thinking he could whip him. Marvin knew too much about the Russell situation and the Talmadge situation. I think he was just trying to scare Ernie off of him. I knew enough about his strategy and thinking to . . . That's what I believe. But Vandiver

may feel stronger about that than what I perceive. He might feel stronger about it 'cause it got pretty hot. The campaign of '58 had a lot of strong rhetoric, strong rhetoric.

Henderson: Before we get in that campaign, let's go back to this fight that you just mentioned in the '58 legislature. How active a role did Vandiver play in defeating this proposal?

Geer: He was the commander of the forces against the rural roads bond issue. I mean, it was--there wasn't any secret about it. He personally buttonholed members of the General Assembly and the House, personally buttonholed them, and laid it on the line: this is my race for governor. Now where do you stand? It was a wide-open fight. It was public statements and private conduct. It was wide open. And, of course, he had no opposition. He was already the acclaimed governor, and he took the legislature away from Marvin Griffin. That's what happened. After that was over, why, the campaign for governor was just a routine matter of form.

Henderson: Now what role were you playing in all of this?

Geer: I was up there as Ernie's aide, as his chief aide, really getting ready to help him run for governor, and that's the reason I went up there. I politicked members of the General Assembly.

Henderson: Now was Governor Griffin on the other side politicking, I presume?

Geer: Yes sir, it was his proposal. It was his proposal to have another fifty million dollars in revenue anticipation certificates, bonds to fund the rural road department and spend, have fifty million dollars to spend in the year 1958 when you had a governor's race. And Vandiver thought that fifty million would be used against him. It might have been; I don't know, but he thought it. Marvin claims that was not true. I think he always maintained that he would not

have used that. It was his last year as governor and he maintained after he left the governorship that he would have used it to augment his administration and not piss it away on some governor's race, frankly. [Laughter] You know, but that was the issue, that was the issue.

Henderson: All right, now besides Governor Vandiver, who were some of the big guns on his side?

Geer: On Vandiver's side?

Henderson: Right.

Geer: Jim [James Lester] Gillis, Sr., who later went to the highway department, had been Herman's highway man; [Curtis] Dixon Oxford, who had been on the highway board under Talmadge and who was in the wings as a Vandiver lieutenant . . . damn near every strong politician in Georgia that I can remember. [Laughter]

Henderson: Who was on the other side helping Governor Griffin?

Geer: Well, you had the members of the . . . Well, of course, you had Roger Lawson. You had the highway board as it then existed, Roy [Franklin] Chalker [Sr.] was over there, one of them that I remember.

Henderson: Was [Robert Alwyn] Cheney Griffin playing a role in all of this?

Geer: Oh yeah, Cheney was Marvin's aide, and he really, Cheney pretty well ran that governor's office, or the details. Yeah, Cheney was involved. The Speaker of the House was Marvin [E.] Moate [Sr.] from Hancock County, 'course he remained loyal to Griffin. He was Griffin's handpicked speaker. [William] Colbert Hawkins was his floor leader. He was from down at the other side of Statesboro. He was not statewide. He was not known too much statewide. The revenue commissioner, Red [Truman Veran] Williams . . .

Besides you had the business community in Georgia pretty well with Vandiver. The big guns, the captains of industry ran pretty well on Vandiver's side for the reason [that] they figured he was going to be governor. Most of the Atlanta banks were on Vandiver's side. As it turns out, a great number of the members of the House--that's where the fight was. It never got to the Senate. The great majority turned to Vandiver. I don't remember any other--Bobby Russell was involved in it. Bobby was a member of the House, Ernie's brother-in-law, Senator Russell's nephew. He was the closest person in Georgia to Ernest Vandiver, Bobby Russell was, unless it had been Senator Russell himself.

Henderson: Was Herman Talmadge involved in this fight in any way to your recollection?

Geer: My recollection is, and knowing Talmadge I believe this recollection is true, I don't think he called any member of the General Assembly and asked them to vote one way or another. My recollection was that he was The Vandiver forces kept in close contact with Talmadge because of his political sense and his knowledge of the state. His advice was, "Don't let it pass, Ernie. This is the damn governor's race." [Laughter] I know he told us that, and he probably helped devise strategy. I do not believe that he uttered a public statement, and I do not believe that he acted or participated. That's my recollection. That's what I think.

Henderson: Was Roy [Vincent] Harris involved in any of this?

Geer: Roy was. Roy was on Vandiver's side. Roy was a Vandiver supporter, and, of course, Roy knew a lot about the General Assembly. That was about Roy's last year being very active. He got old later, but, yeah, he was involved. I don't know why I forgot him, but he was with the Vandiver crowd. We had regular meetings of the advisors to Governor Vandiver, the head-counts in the lower house and strategy on what to do to get them on Vandiver's side. And Roy

was involved in that. He was. I don't know why I forgot it.

Willis [Neal] Harden was on Marvin Griffin's highway board. He was a very close friend of Governor Griffin. Willis was from up in north Georgia, Jackson County, I believe. Willis resigned from the highway board and turned over and made a public statement for Vandiver in that rural roads fight. That's about all I can remember.

Henderson: All right. Let's go on then. So after this there was A strong candidate did not come forward against Vandiver?

Geer: No, no. He never, there was never a strong challenge to Vandiver being governor. It was just not in the cards. He'd made a good lieutenant governor; he was a good campaigner; he was Dick's [Russell] nephew; he was Talmadge's man and his own man in his own right, and it just--there wasn't any opposition.

Henderson: How did Bill [William Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.] get involved in this?

Geer: [Laughter] Bill had been a member of the General Assembly one time or another and he had been, I remember as a little boy, when my daddy was a county school superintendent back in Miller County, I remember Bill Bodenhamer working with the State Department of Education when I was a kid. And Bill He'd travel around all over the state, and he--we had a State's Rights Council that was formed in those years. Bill Bodenhamer turned out to be the director of the State's Rights Council.

And when the Roger Lawson candidacy failed, Red Williams, the revenue commissioner, pumped Bodenhamer up to run. Marvin Griffin knew that was a joke. Everybody knew it. But Red Williams did [urge him to run] and financed him to the best--whatever extent he was financed. I think he picked him because Bodenhamer had had some

statewide contact out of the Department of Education through the years, and he was director of the State's Rights Council and had local contact in every county.

Henderson: Why does Williams want a candidate to run against Vandiver?

Geer: He never did like Ernie Vandiver. Ernie Vandiver didn't like him. Ernie thought that he was not ethical and was not too reticent about saying so. That basically was

Henderson: All right. Now during the campaign Governor Vandiver makes a statement, the so called "No, not one," and prior to making that statement there was a great deal of discussion among his advisors about whether he should make the statement or not. Do you recall any of that discussion about whether he should or should not? Can you talk about that?

Geer: I can talk about part of it. I don't think there was a great deal of discussion about it. In the '58 campaign, to give you some background, again, I had served up there during that legislature, an aide to Governor Vandiver, and he asked me to come to Atlanta and help him on his campaign, and I did so. I actually ran it. Mr. Jim Gillis was the campaign manager and he was down at the hotel. Bob Russell and I were running the campaign [mechanics] and doing the work. And I would meet with Mr. Jim very often when he had delegations come in, but I had been I was with him constantly in that campaign. Every Saturday he had a statewide radio hook-up, the old time politics, somewhere on some courthouse square in Georgia. And he made a regular Saturday speech every Saturday, went out to the press with a prepared speech. I've forgotten where he made the speech you referred to. I remember it. I don't remember where in the hell, where it was. [Laughter]

Henderson: I don't either.

Geer: But Bodenhamer was accusing Vandiver of being soft on the issue and this, that, and

the other. And a lot of Vandiver supporters were--from out in the state--were calling up there and saying he needs to make some strong statements and this, that, and the other. I do not believe that--he had a regular group that met every Sunday afternoon late at the Dinkler Plaza Hotel during the campaign and talked about the campaign.

Well the speech had to be made on a Saturday. It would've been embargoed to the press whatever hour we were going to make it, and it would have been prepared at least by Friday night at nine o'clock--or earlier. So this advisory group that met every Sunday would not have had an opportunity to go over that with him. For that reason I don't think there was a lot of discussion--there was a lot of discussion after he'd made it. [Laughter] But I don't think a lot preceded it. Other than that, Governor Vandiver can address that. I wouldn't know.

Henderson: Did you urge that he make such a speech?

Geer: Uh, he'll have to talk to you about that.

Henderson: Okay, all right.

Geer: I didn't think it was necessary for him to do that. I thought he could be elected. I don't recall that I had anything to do with it one way or another.

Henderson: Well, a thought comes to mind here. Here is Bodenhamer perceived as a relatively weak candidate. Is Vandiver running a strong campaign like he has a serious opponent?

Geer: Yes, he did. He was financed to do so, and when you run, you run to win with all you got. You don't hold back the store. He wanted to carry 159, and my recollection is we carried 158. No, we carried 157.

Henderson: 156.

Geer: 156? Lost Tift; Bodenhamer was from Ty Ty. I think we lost Early County.

Bodenhamer used to preach over that way. I don't remember any other county. . . .

Henderson: Decatur County, if I remember correctly.

Geer: I don't think we did. I could be wrong.

Henderson: Okay. I could be in error.

Geer: I think it was two, Tift and Early.

Henderson: Who were some of his close advisors during that campaign that he . . . ?

Geer: Governor Vandiver? Dixon Oxford, Mr. Jim Gillis, Bobby Russell, who was his brother-in-law and who was my roommate during that campaign. . . . He conferred with Senator Talmadge a lot. The Senator never picked the phone up and offered any advice. Governor Vandiver would talk to him about strategy. A lot of that was private talk. Roy Harris, John Sammons Bell who was county attorney for the County Commissioners Association of Georgia, who Ernie later put on the Court of Appeals. Griffin [Boyette] Bell to some extent--not much. Griffin later was Ernie's chief of staff and Griffin was for him. He was with the Spalding firm. Griffin offered a word of advice. [Unintelligible] he was a strong Vandiver supporter, but I don't recall Griffin meeting with us any on Sunday afternoon. Bob [Robert Henry] Jordan, who was a close friend of Ernie's and who Ernie later put on the Court of Appeals, was a close friend of Ernie's and that was from college days. And I'm sure they talked a lot but I don't recall Bob hanging around Atlanta much.

Henderson: Did he ever seek advice from Senator Russell about

Geer: I'm sure he did, but I can tell you this: it was the biggest secret in Georgia. Senator Russell Oh hell, yes, he sought advice from him. Senator Russell absolutely would not

poke his nose in somebody else's business. He finally, he was prevailed upon him to come to Gainesville, Georgia, and sit on the platform. I believe that was the last Saturday of the campaign. He did sit on the platform in Gainesville. I think he got mad with some of Vandiver's opponents who kept sniping at him and maybe sniped a little at the senator, I think. Yes, he advised with him, I'm sure, yeah.

Henderson: Now in '58 Georgia is still under the county unit system. Now, what is the politics of getting elected governor under the county unit system? I mean

Geer: Well, there's been a lot of myth about that. I had to run for lieutenant governor under the unit system. The year I ran it was knocked down and I ran without it. I didn't change my tactics one iota. There obviously was more local power under the unit system at the courthouse level, the city hall level, this, that, and the other, the precinct level, than you've got without it. But unless you were a strong statewide candidate, you couldn't stir that power up. If you didn't run pretty good with the popular votes, you weren't going to run good with the unit votes. And that's something that anti-unit people have never wanted to realize and never want to recognize, but it was a fact. Gene Talmadge got elected governor without the popular vote and ran away with the unit vote against Jimmy [James Vinson] Carmichael, but I don't think it was but eight or ten thousand votes statewide between them. So you've never had the situation where a man didn't run well with the popular vote without running well with the unit.

Now Marvin Griffin ran one without the popular vote. That was a divided slate. You had Fred [Frederick Barrow] Hand running, who was the Speaker of the House. You had Tom [Thomas Mercer] Linder running, who was the commissioner of agriculture. You had a lawyer from down in Glynn county Oh hell, he's with the Spalding firm now, had been a leader in

the House. I'll think of his name. He was running.

Henderson: Was that [Charles Latimer] Gowen?

Geer: Yeah, Charlie Gowen. Charlie was a good man. But Marvin still led with the popular vote. He had more popular votes than the rest of them, but he won without [a majority of] the popular vote because of the split situation.

Henderson: Okay, now try and understand this campaign a little bit.

Geer: Let me go further about that county unit thing. The opponents to the unit system alleged and contended that if you had the sheriff and the aldermen or the mayor of the town, that you could just get those folks and carry the county. That was not the truth. That was never true. For example, the strongest advocate of the unit system that ever lived was Gene Talmadge and he never had the courthouse crowd for him, never. He beat hell out of them with country folks. [Laughter] But even in Telfair County, when he first ran, the courthouse crowd was against Gene Talmadge. That just was not true. Now if you had the country folks for you and the local bosses, that was gravy, but you could win without them. Marvin Griffin, who was a strong advocate of the unit system, Marvin welcomed any local fish that he could into his camp but when Marvin went into a county's politics, he wouldn't let anybody in that county walk the streets with him. He knew better than to do that, because the unit system created local factions and they were pretty evened up. You had the anti-sheriff crowd, the pro-sheriff crowd and if one crowd was for you the other crowd [was] damn sure against you. It was just that divided. So you had to walk a tight rope.

The state really was divided up into Talmadge and anti-Talmadge. That was your two-party system in Georgia. Though I would hasten to add that the unit system You probably

became a stronger candidate if you had the local folks for you. You probably did. I'm not trying to say you did not. But it was never the bugaboo that it was made out to be.

And when I ran and they knocked it out, oh, five, six--maybe a month before I announced, I didn't change my strategy one bit, because I was not going to the courthouse and depending on Tom Jones to [unintelligible]. I was going out and pumping the flesh and working like hell. So you always had to do that, always had to do that.

Henderson: Let me go back to the '58 campaign

Geer: Vandiver went strong with radio, with TV, and newspapers ads, local and with the dailies. He did the fundamentals that you do today, except that there was more emphasis on the Saturday afternoon speech. The crowds had dwindled by '58. We had some good crowds, but they had somewhat dwindled, but that radio was listened to pretty well. So there was no theme. We targeted the TV ad and he went on television once every week with a thirty-minute address. You didn't have the [sound]bites then. You went thirty minutes, a few clips, but that was every week. And it was in every station in Georgia. So that was the first time you had the Columbus station, Atlanta, Augusta, Savannah, Albany--Dothan, Alabama, even came in to southwest Georgia, and Tallahassee came in. We used all of it and you do the same thing today.

Henderson: Is he the first serious candidate to use television in his campaign?

Geer: Yes. I don't recall that Marvin Griffin used it too much, which was the previous four years. Herman got to using TV as governor, but he didn't use it, no. Nobody had a television set back then. '58 was the first time and, of course, now, that's the way. Plus, you got to go out and pump the flesh. You've got to do it all, do it all.

Henderson: What kind of campaigner was Vandiver?

Geer: Ernie had a good, strong resonant voice. His voice has deteriorated in recent years. I don't know whether you noticed that or not, but he [had a] strong, resonant voice. He had a sincere manner about him and he was a good speaker. He was audible. He was serious-minded in his speaking. He usually used a prepared text, but he used it well. He could speak without one, but he usually had a prepared text. And Ernie could work a crowd real well. Ernie was not as good in a room full of men as, say, Marvin Griffin would be. I don't know many people that were, but Ernie could use a stump well and he could walk the streets of a town or a community and shake hands well, well received.

Henderson: All right, now, you say he was not as good in a group of men. What do you mean by that?

Geer: Marvin Griffin exuded more personality than a show dog. I mean, he was full of stories; he was a great raconteur; he was always beaming and smiling and happy, just a good mixer, better mixer than Herman Talmadge. Herman could outspoke all of them. Herman could mesmerize a crowd better than any man I ever saw, better than Marvin could. And Herman could work a crowd, but you might be in a room with Herman Talmadge for about five minutes, he'd light up, and then he'd just sit down, wouldn't say a damn word. [Laughter] He didn't feel like it, still that way.

Henderson: Campaign finance. Did he have any problems raising money?

Geer: No, because he was the acclaimed governor. By the time that '58 session was over, the money just rolled in from all over Georgia. He didn't have any problem raising money.

Henderson: Now where did he get most of his money from?

Geer: Local folks. Gosh, we kept a list. I don't imagine he ever made it public but

Local friends You hear a lot about the Atlanta banks. The most money I ever saw out of a bank was \$5500, and I don't know of any campaign contribution Ernie got from a bank more than that. Herman tells me that throughout his career the most money the Trust Company--and he was always a Trust Company--ever gave him was five thousand dollars. So that's a myth. Now when The one exception to that. Who was this damn guy who was such a strong . . . at C&S [Citizens and Southern] bank? Mills [Bee] Lane [Jr.]?

Henderson: Mills Lane, yes.

Geer: When Mills Lane was operating in that bank in Atlanta, Mills Lane would raise money any damn way he could do it, and he'd put the bite on business people and customers and so on. Mills would do it, but Mills was not involved in that campaign to any extent, very little.

Henderson: Now was there any one or two or three major contributors that stand out in your mind?

Geer: No. It was pretty well state wide, pretty well state wide. Mr. Gillis would sit over at the Dinkler, and Mr. Gillis was not a big talker but he was a pleasant man and he knew how to get along with people. He, a lot of times, if a delegation was coming up for lunch or something, Mr. Jim sends for me to help bullshit them. [Laughter] They would come in from say, Podunk, Georgia, and bring three or four thousand dollars, just ordinary people from out in the state. And they would do it constantly and that's where the bulk of the money came from, the very bulk of it. I couldn't estimate how much money that campaign cost or how much he raised but we never hurt for finances. It was well financed.

Henderson: Now, back then was there any kind of campaign financing reports?

Geer: None.

Henderson: It was all cash and. . . .

Geer: Well, I think that there was a Georgia statute, a kind of obscure statute that no one paid any attention to that you had to file with the comptroller general--I think. Some states [unintelligible]. After your campaign was over how much you'd spent and nobody ever put it down like it was, but I don't remember. And I don't remember that from my own experience. I liked to forgot to do it. That's how important it was. [Laughter] It would not have been accurate, I would say.

Henderson: Now, anything else you want to say about the '58 campaign?

Geer: No, except that it was very. . . . You know, knowing you were going to win, it was pleasure to go out and campaign and that sort of thing. But no, I don't remember anything remarkable about it.

Henderson: Do you find in a situation like that the local officeholders tend to get on your bandwagon in a hurry?

Geer: Yes, yes. Not only that, but every local person that was involved [in] politics just came together. All factions supported him, all factions.

Henderson: Let me go back just for a moment to your role in that campaign. Again, you said you were serving as campaign manager?

Geer: No, Mr. Jim Gillis was the named campaign manager. Bob Russell and I, Ernie's brother-in-law, we had a campaign headquarters office over the William and Oliver building. I handled all the mail and behind the scenes sort of stuff for Ernie, the mechanics. Bob and I did it. I rode hard on local [level], what was happening on the local in every county and that sort of

thing. I kept in touch with them. . . .

Henderson: Now, what was the extent of Roy Harris' involvement?

Geer: Roy did not stay in Atlanta. Mr. Gillis stayed in Atlanta the whole summer. He and Dixon Oxford, I think Dixon might have been co-manager, or something of that sort. I think Dixon stayed pretty well the whole summer. Roy would come over and visit once a week or something, would call on the phone. He was not that active. He was for Ernie, but he didn't do much with the mechanics of it.

Henderson: Okay. Let's move on to his administration. You served as his executive secretary. First of all, how did that come about?

Geer: Well, I had had this relationship with Governor Vandiver that I've already outlined to you, having been his aide in '58 and having known him all these years. [I] worked with him in the '58 campaign, and Bob Russell, his brother-in-law, we roomed together at the Henry Grady Hotel, and we were already friends but we became extremely close friends. I had a great, great many pleasant meetings in Winder when the senator was there. It was an enriching thing for a young fellow like me. I just became a close friend [with Bob] in addition to working with him.

When the election was over finally, the primary, which was the election then, Bob and Ernie and I . . . well, Bob and I, we met Ernest Vandiver at Senator Russell's house one night. We left Atlanta and went to Senator Russell's house in Winder and while we were there, just the four of us, Ernie called me out on the front porch and asked me if I'd [like to] be his executive secretary. It's that simple and I told him that I would. So that's how it happened. I just stayed in Atlanta for the transition and we had a lot to do to get ready to go over there.

Ernie had run on a campaign of honesty and efficiency in government, if you remember the ethical sort of stuff. I drew, Lamar [W.] Sizemore and I drew, wrote the number one Vandiver bill to go to the House called The Honesty in Government Bill. It was so damn tight they watered it down some. [Laughter] When it got over there it was tight as hell. That was his number one bill, the honesty in government proposition. A lot of it's still on the books.

Henderson: Now, you saw him on a daily basis while he was governor. How would you describe his stewardship as governor?

Geer: Number one is that Ernie Vandiver, Ernie's . . . personal trait, Ernie is a thrifty man. You might call him tight. [Laughter] But he's very thrifty. Raised that way. His old daddy was and he treated the state's money the same way. Plus the fact that he came in and he had pledged no new taxes and it was very difficult to keep that pledge. The state was in somewhat of a financial bind when he took the governor's office over. And he had to devote his time and his energies and his thoughts to cutting that budget and living within the framework of income and revenue. And he did it. It was hard to do and a lot of it was unpopular. When you start cutting they get to hollering, they get to hollering.

But he did it and he was very business-like about state government. There was no foolishness. It was almost like a banker sitting down working on that budget. And that took a lot of his time. He knew what he was doing. He had some good help but he knew, he'd been in government long enough to understand the budget process and state finances and this, that, and the other. And that took up his time more than anything else in the governor's office--the budget.

And it's still the main thing a governor has to deal with, is the budget. It's always on

you, always on you. And your department heads, even though they're your friends, if you don't pull the throttle back, they'll spend you out of the capital. They'll submit budgets to you that are not realistic and that sort of thing. He told all of his department heads: "You submit me a budget, you're going to have to come over here and justify it in my office." And that's the way it was. He reduced a great number [through request]. Well, he did [reduce], [he eliminated] a great number of state employees and cut out a lot of waste. I thought he probably administered the government good or better than anybody I ever saw.

Henderson: It seems like governors periodically have run-ins with high-ranking bureaucrats or administrators. Do you recall him having any run-ins with bureaucrats in his administration?

Geer: No, and I'll tell you why. At that period of time the people in government were there at the sufferance of the governor and they damn well knew it. The governor--we knew every time you changed administrations you changed department heads, sub-department heads, and so on. Your people were in the government so you didn't have any trouble with them. All [of] them, you know, they were pressuring for that position, but he was the boss and they knew that.

Henderson: Would you describe him as an easy-going personality, a person who very rarely resorted to anger, but if he did, can you recall whether he ever got angry with a legislator or maybe the legislature itself?

Geer: Governor Vandiver was and is a very easy-going man, but he's a very intense man, and about his business he's very serious minded. And yes, he would get mad

End of Side One

Side Two

Henderson: Discussing Governor Vandiver, did he ever display any anger towards

legislators or bureaucrats or anybody that you can recall?

Geer: I don't recall ever seeing Ernie Vandiver be less than a gentleman towards any individual. I know that he would sometimes get mad or irritated with a member of the legislature or maybe somebody in his administration, and he had a demeanor about him that you could tell he didn't like what was going on, but he was a gentleman with it. He was not a man that would threaten anybody. But you could tell by the look in his face whether he liked it or not. [Laughter] And he would use some commanding words, but it was in a gentleman-like sense.

Henderson: Would you consider him a strong governor? Was he constantly lobbying legislators to get his legislation through or his way done?

Geer: Ernie was indeed a strong governor in that once he took a position, made his mind up, that's the way it was. I don't mean that he was unreasonable in taking a position, but when he took a position, he meant it. He was a strong man and a strong governor, particularly with the budget and with his absolute demand that his administration walk [the] straight and narrow. There was total honesty.

He did not particularly enjoy lobbying the legislature on a personal basis. He liked people but he didn't like that role. And, when you don't like to do something, you don't do much of it. So I would say that that's something he probably might should have done a little bit more [of] is lobby the legislature a little bit more. He would lobby them, but I sometimes thought he was a little reluctant to do that.

Henderson: Let's go to one of the major controversies in his administration. It had to do with the issue of segregation. A federal judge orders that the University of Georgia be

desegregated. There is a state law that says if desegregation. . . .

Geer: Funds cut off. [Laughter]

Henderson: Funds cut off. And he makes a decision to keep the university open. Now, I understand that there was a meeting at the governor's mansion where there was about fifty or sixty of his advisors and they discussed what he should do. Were you at that meeting?

Geer: Yeah.

Henderson: Would you discuss that meeting?

Geer: Well, I don't know. It was a private meeting. At that time he would not want that to have been discussed with the press. I would rather him deal with that. I can simply say this: it was not that many people there. There was a great number of people there. He demonstrated wisdom and courage in what he did against the backdrop of the campaign he had run. He, of course, kept the university open and everyone remembered what happened to Gene Talmadge about the university, including Herman, and Herman realized while Gene might have been right on philosophy, you can't close the university or get it discredited. It'll backfire on you.

If he had closed it down, it wouldn't have stayed closed any longer than it took the plaintiffs to get to the judge and get it ordered "Open it," maybe twenty-four hours. I knew that. But there was never This business of closing the school? Just as long as it took the federal judge to sign another order. That was never anything that really had any realistic prospect of coming about.

Henderson: Let me ask you this question: did he ever turn to you and say, "Peter Zack, what do you recommend I do in this situation?"

Geer: He didn't ever just get advice from one person. Ernie, and I think any governor or

leader that's got people around him, you want to get a composite view. And he usually did, and I don't recall any one thing that he ever just directly asked me by myself. But he sought my opinion as well as others and then made his mind up. Or he [might] turn [some] thing over to me just to get it done, use my own discretion. But I don't remember any major thing he just took my advice on and no one else's, never.

Henderson: At the university during this whole process, there's . . . some people say there's a riot, some say there's a demonstration by the students. And I understand that you issued a statement where, the press says anyway, where you were praising those people, demonstrating against the federal order. Would you discuss that?

Geer: Well, yeah. Number one, I did issue a public statement on my own without asking anybody about it. I wrote it--I was living in a little old ranch house up at Roswell, Georgia, where I lived at the time, and I sat down and wrote the statement out in my handwriting and called it in. Somewhere in my files I've got the statement. I don't know that I can remember it verbatim. I'll try to get it to you like it was. The Atlanta press took it and garbled hell out of it. [Laughter]

But anyway, I think you would've had to been on the campus to know what was [happening]--I was not there. We were getting news reports on what was going on over there. And my recollection is there never was any riot on the campus. I think there was some disruption and I think there was some things that could have led to a riot, but I don't recall of anybody being injured or hurt. That's my recollection.

The federal judge that issued that order, incidentally, was a classmate of my daddy's at Mercer Law School, and he's a friend of mine today. He's retired. He's still living in Macon.

He issued it in the middle of the night. He issued it in the middle of the night. Well, damn near the middle of the night. I thought there was some method in that. I thought there was some method in that, to catch everybody asleep. I didn't particularly like that but I didn't mention that in my statement.

I had a report that the students were peacefully demonstrating against the order. That's the report I had. Did I say that I was out at home in Roswell? And I had only the reports that were on TV at the time. And I don't recall seeing any picture of it, some news reports. And I issued a statement that the young men and young women, something to this effect, that had the courage to resist the tyranny of the federal government were to be commended. However, Georgia could never tolerate violence of any kind and I certainly hoped and prayed there would be no violence at the University of Georgia. That's all I said.

I specifically counseled against violence. And I don't think there was any. I don't remember anybody being hurt or a brick hitting anybody or a bottle--I don't think it was. I figured anybody in America that had a point of view could demonstrate and I think they still can. [Laughter]

Henderson: Let me carry it one step further. Now, the Atlanta papers indicate that you were taken to task for making this statement by the governor.

Geer: No. I guess it was the next day that it hit the press. The press garbled hell out of it. And when I got to the office the next morning I had my hand-written statement. I had my secretary type it up and make me some copies 'cause I realized what they were trying to do with it. And I had a written statement. When you do, you stand on it, you know. You can't say, "They misquoted me, or blah-blah." They either did or didn't.

And Ernie called for me to come over to his office and said, "What is this statement that you issued last night?" He heard something in the press, and I pulled it out my pocket and read it to him. He read it. He just smiled. He said, "This ain't what they're reporting, is it?" I said, "No, it's not, governor." That was the end of it. He would have taken anybody in his administration to task if they advocated violence, and he should have. But that was not the case, and, hell, I wouldn't advocate violence. A man that's trained in the law that would advocate violence, there ain't much to him.

Henderson: Why do you think the Atlanta papers garbled your speech?

Geer: Well, I probably was too much a conservative for the crowd that was up there at that time. I think Gene [Eugene] Patterson was over at the paper and his philosophy and mine were altogether different. I suspect he thought I was probably the only young conservative in Georgia that could tote water, and he didn't want me toting it, [he] wanted to punch the bucket full of holes. I suspect that's right.

He had a picture of me--I never went in his office--he had a picture of me in his office. I've been told this by some of the working press, and they asked him why he had a picture of me in his office when they knew he disliked me. He said, "I don't want to forget that son of a bitch." [Laughter] So, you know. That's neither here nor there.

Henderson: Let's go to the Sibley Commission. Were you involved in any way with the Sibley Commission?

Geer: Yes. I read in this book that you helped put together and that you were kind enough to give me, and autograph for me, that Governor Vandiver said that his chief of staff, Griffin Bell, suggested the Sibley Commission to him. You know, that's certainly a true statement, but

I don't think it's a complete statement. I don't think he's trying to hide anything. There's nothing to hide.

Buck [B. D.] Murphy was the lawyer that had handled these cases back even from the Talmadge administration right on through. Buck was a very--he was a great lawyer, smart lawyer. Buck was doing the litigating. Griffin Bell came into the picture on it. Griffin was a good lawyer. He had never handled any civil rights business at that time. And Griffin and I were meeting with Buck Murphy from time to time. Buck was a realist and we were. We knew what was eventually going to happen, that some federal court was going to order it be done. We knew that.

Buck suggested to me and Griffin Bell the idea of a governor's appointment of a blue ribbon commission to study the question. And Buck said, "bide some time." One thing, "bide some time." And that maybe such a commission of that nature could condition Georgia to what was going to happen, 'cause we knew what was going to happen. I don't know who mentioned it to the governor first, me or Griffin Bell. I don't remember--It doesn't matter.

It was conceived and we sat out at the mansion one weekend and drew up a format. He appointed, he selected some people sort of ex officio, the president of the Farm Bureau, the head of the GEA [Georgia Education Association] and other groups. I've forgotten who suggested Judge [John Adams] Sibley. I just don't remember, but he was a very distinguished, well thought of Georgian. And there were some members of the General Assembly on the commission. I don't remember who they were.

Then this commission came out of the legislature as if it emanated there. I suggested that George [Dekle] Busbee introduce it. George was a bright young member of the House. He

was not controversial. He was pretty well--he was well thought of. But George had never been partisan, never was all of his life far as I know. [Laughter] But I suggested that George do it.

We didn't want it, we--my father suggested, "Let me handle that through Jimmy [James Harrison] Gray [Sr]." Jimmy was chairman of the Democratic Party and close to Vandiver and to me and lived here [Albany]. And I knew he could make George [swim] up the Flint River if he wanted to. [Laughter] Don't quote that but, you know, he was close to George. So Jimmy persuaded George to introduce a resolution calling for this commission and he did so, and that was the background.

Henderson: Now, you supported apparently all the Sibley Commission

Geer: I was supportive of the concept of the Sibley Commission, yes.

Henderson: Were you supportive of its recommendation of local option?

Geer: Well, I didn't think the local option was viable legally and I didn't think anything else was viable legally. I thought the courts were going to do what they were going to do. Of course, everybody now sees that was true. I thought that to talk about that Fannin County could do one thing and Seminole [County] another was damn foolishness and I still think so. I don't think it's realistic, but it doesn't matter.

Henderson: Let me go to the 1960 presidential election. There is a rather famous arrest during that election. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is arrested in Georgia and he is going to be freed, and the press is speculating that maybe Governor Vandiver played a role behind the scenes in getting Dr. King released. Are you familiar with any of the activities involving that situation?

Geer: Yes, Governor Vandiver was sick with a heart attack. When the arrest took place--

certainly there was not anybody in the administration who had anything to do with that arrest. It was done locally in DeKalb County. I don't remember where it was in DeKalb County. DeKalb county, county police, sheriff--I don't know who. It was not a state trooper. I think it was a traffic violation. I don't recall.

John [Fitzgerald] Kennedy called Governor Vandiver and he was not there. He was out so they transferred him over to me. And at that time there was a county commissioner from Reidsville named John Kennedy visiting me every damn week about a road. [Laughter] And my secretary said, "John Kennedy 's on the phone." And I said, "Well, hold him a minute. Hell, I talk to him two or three times a week." [Laughter] She came in there, said, "No," said, "Senator Kennedy."

So I picked the phone up and he just, very business-like, he said, "I had called for your governor. I understand that he's out. Express my regrets to him." Said, "I'm calling about Martin Luther King. What's the situation down there?" I said, "Senator, all I know is he's in the penitentiary." It was all I knew. He said, "Well," he said, "You know, something needs to be done about it."

And I proceeded to tell him about appeals, and he said, "No, I'm not talking about that. That's too long. We got a campaign on our hands. Something needs to be done about it." Well, he said, "I'm fixing to go somewhere"--oh, he asked me--he had made a statement No, he hadn't made a statement. He had called Mrs. [Coretta Scott] Martin Luther King and personally expressed his condolences. That was a front-page headline at that moment. And he asked me, said, "What do you think about if I make any further statements?" I said, "Well,

you're in the headlines this morning. I don't think you need to say anymore." And he didn't-- [Robert Francis Kennedy] Bobby did. He let Bobby do it.

So he had some guy working his campaign to call back, and I really--I don't know who they talked to to get him out. I just don't know anymore about that. [Laughter] But Governor Vandiver was not talked to about it so far as I know, so far as I know.

Henderson: Now still with the 1960 campaign, there is some talk prior to the Democratic nomination, that some of the southern states may bolt from the Democratic Party. And there's some talk that Governor Vandiver may be involved in leaving the party, or at least voting for somebody rather than the Democratic candidate.

Geer: Do you mean after the convention?

Henderson: Well, prior to the convention and then after the convention. Why did Governor Vandiver support Kennedy at the convention?

Geer: I don't recall and I certainly do not categorically dispute your observation that there was talk of bolting of the party--I don't recall that. The only recollection I have Of course, there was some bolting that went on in '48 with [James] Strom Thurmond, but we were not on the scene. And I don't recall any talk about bolting. There was talk about electors being independent, and they weren't bound to do--they could do what they wanted to. But I don't recall that.

My recollection of the whole '60 campaign was that we, and I know this to be true, every member of the delegation went out there pledged to Lyndon [Baines] Johnson, before we got there we were pledged to him. And I must assume that Lyndon Johnson thought he was a serious candidate. He was the majority leader of the Senate. I assume he really tried to get the

nomination. But we went out there pledged to him and, of course, at that time, Lyndon Johnson and Dick Russell were pretty close. So was Senator Talmadge, pretty close to him.

He was a southerner. Bobby Russell, Governor Vandiver's brother-in-law, was close to him. I just casually knew him. I didn't know him. But we all went out there pledged to him and then when--he failed, of course, the Kennedys had it locked up from the very beginning. Never was a contest.

Well, when that happened, there was a great stir among southern delegates as to what they were going to do. We wound up, Lyndon wound up on the ticket for vice-president. And that ended the stir, that ended it. There wasn't any further talk of bolting. And, of course, if you're going to be placated with that then you're going to support the head of the ticket. And we came home and did that.

Now Ernie Vandiver did not as governor do a whole a lot of talking about that campaign. I think--this is my recall on it, he would remember better than I. The press will tell you it there. My recollection [unintelligible], he probably said, "I'm going to support the Democratic ticket." I don't think he went out and stumped the state or anything of that sort. There was some reservation about how strong Kennedy would run in Georgia. Griffin Bell became chairman of the Kennedy campaign in Georgia. Griffin lived in Atlanta. I guess he thought that was a big thing and he was to have it. [Laughter] And it turned out well for him. I think it got him on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

But anyway, Griffin was Ernie's chief of staff so Ernie was not disavowing Kennedy, none of us did, and he carried the state, as I recall, very well. I believe, didn't he carry it pretty overwhelmingly?

Henderson: Sure did.

Geer: My recollection is that I went, I flew home down to Colquitt, Georgia, to vote. And standing in line at the courthouse, I recall the farmers joshing around about--"Go get the justice of the peace and get a search warrant and see if you can find a goddamn Republican. We don't know where any of those son of a bitches are." That was the attitude. Four years later, they were wanting to find a Democrat. Barry [Morris] Goldwater was running. I don't recall anything about bolting the party, about Kennedy at all.

Now, Senator Talmadge--Kennedy went to Warm Springs and spoke, the [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt thing. Talmadge rode in the car with him. I remember Herman telling me, he said, "Peter Zack, I ain't never seen anything like it." He said, "Those country women up there in gingham dresses, fifty years old, but screaming just to get close to him. You [have] never seen such damn charisma." [Laughter]

Henderson: Let me go to a major controversy in the Vandiver administration and that's the so-called battle of the budget. Were you involved in that fight?

Geer: Yeah, I was the governor's executive secretary, and, of course, I took the governor's point of view. That was the first rumblings of the legislature trying to be independent of the governor. Prior to that time . . . Marvin Griffin, Herman Talmadge, I guess to some extent M. E. [Melvin Ernest Thompson], and certainly with Ellis Arnall. Prior to that, [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers, [Eugene] Talmadge, all of them. The General Assembly was pretty much a rubber stamp for the governor.

The speaker of the House was actually handpicked by the governor. While the House had to elect him, he was the governor's handpicked man. George L. [Leon] Smith [II] was

speaker at this time, and he was Ernie Vandiver's handpicked man. Frank [Starling] Twitty was the floor leader. He was from Camilla, Georgia. He was Ernie's floor leader. He had been Talmadge's floor leader, very experienced. Jack [Bowdoin] Ray, who later was state treasurer, Jack Ray was chairman of the appropriations committee. And some of Ernie's own folks sort of got to bucking around about they were going to write the budget this time, sort of tried to take it away from him.

And it was quite a stir. It got compromised out and settled. And I don't remember the details of it, but it was the beginning of the House becoming sort of independent of the governor. And while Ernie kept strong leadership and continued to dominate the House, the stir started then, the stir started then. And finally, when Lester Maddox became governor, it came in full bloom. It came in full bloom to where the House, and somewhat the Senate, were pretty much independent of the governor if they choose to be. In other words, the governor can't pick the phone up and dictate anymore. And that's true today.

Henderson: Now, are you saying that some of his own leaders in the legislature [were] leading this fight against the governor, and. . . ?

Geer: Well, they were not too open with it, but they were, under the cover they were. They certainly were.

Henderson: Now what led to this? Is there anything that all of sudden in 1961 they're going to challenge the governor here? Can you recall? I know it's been several years ago.

Geer: It'd be speculation. I don't know.

Henderson: Okay. In 1960, after President Kennedy is elected, there is some talk in the newspaper about President-Elect Kennedy appointing him to be his secretary of the army.

Geer: Yeah, I recall that. I didn't remember where it was while [sic] he was president-elect or actually the president. I don't remember.

Henderson: It could be president. Okay.

Geer: I remember the occasion. There was, and I didn't think Ernie ever showed too much interest in that. It's something that any governor would be flattered about, for it to be talked nationally, that he's going to appoint you secretary of the army or that sort of thing. All political leaders want to be mentioned for a higher job if there is one. [Laughter] All of them do. But I don't recall him being very serious about that. I really do not. I don't remember how it got started. But I know that it was afoot publicly and the press was speculating about it. Vandiver was keeping his mouth shut as I recall just to let the rumor run, but I don't think he was very serious about that. I think he was determined to serve his term out and to try and do what he told people he would do. That's what I think about it.

Henderson: Let me go back to you serving as his executive secretary. What does a governor--what did Governor Vandiver spend most of his time doing? I mean, is it spending most of the time with the budget or is hearing from people wanting roads paved or is it people wanting jobs?

Geer: He spent most of his time working with the budget frankly, because he was under a financial crunch. And it was difficult to operate the state without increasing taxes and he had pledged not to do it. It was Ernie's nature not to want to raise taxes anyway. That's his nature. And he agonized and worked with that budget more than he did anything else, and, of course, he had to do the ceremonial things that a governor must do. He had to fight the crowds wanting to see him about patronage and roads and jobs, and that can eat a governor alive with time. And

he turned a lot of that over to me.

Then after he had his heart attack I mean, that can pressurize you, a hundred people waiting in your office to see you one at a time. He, of course, he saw a lot of people. But if he could, he'd turn [them] over my way or back to department heads. But he saw, he still saw a lot of people from the local precincts; most of his time was on the budget. That's primarily what it was.

Henderson: A typical day, when would he come in and when would he leave?

Geer: He would come in . . . as I recall, Ernie came in around eight or eight-thirty, probably nearer eight o'clock. And he would, depending on what he had to do that day, he--the governor has to do a lot of speaking, not just in the Atlanta area, all over the state. And you've got to do it. If you don't do it, you lose leadership. If you stay out before the people, you continue to be the leader. If you don't, who are you? And he had to do a lot of that. If he didn't have to go somewhere in the afternoon or make some appearance somewhere, he'd leave around five o'clock, and then sometimes midnight depending on what the workload was. He was a hardworking governor, very dedicated.

Henderson: What would you, looking back at his administration, what would you call his major accomplishments?

Geer: Well, if I had to look at concrete things that were enacted into law, I'd say the reorganization and the clean up of the deplorable conditions that existed at the Milledgeville State Hospital. It was absolutely inhumane. And the only way a person could comprehend that is go look at that time. You'd leave depressed, just absolutely depressed. His wife, Betty, joined that effort and they created a chapel of all faiths there, but there's a lot of legislation

about mental health. I believe Dr. Bruce Schaeffer from Toccoa was appointed chairman of the committee that looked into it. And that was one thing he did that was enacted into law that I thought was great.

Beyond that, Ernie did a lot for the university system. He did a lot for the public schools in general. My recollection is that the regional junior colleges, that concept went on the books while he was governor. If I'm not badly mistaken I came to Albany, Georgia, in his place for the meeting to announce and confirm that the Darton College was going to open. I recall that. I do not believe the junior colleges were funded at that time but the concept was laid out and in place.

I recall that Dr. [Omer Clyde] Aderhold at the university didn't like that too much. Dr. Aderhold thought--it shows you how--he was a fine man, but it shows how thinking can get caught up in your own backyard. He thought to have a great university, that you had to have at least ten or twelve thousand students there. Well, that's about what Georgia had. And he thought, and he wouldn't say this openly, I figured him out, though. He'd say so much that I could figure out where he was coming from. He thought that if we established these junior colleges all over the state, it was going to siphon student personnel away from the university and he wouldn't have the nucleus up there he needed.

It didn't happen that way. They run [unintelligible] years at Georgia now and, of course, these community colleges have been great for education in Georgia. That was something Ernie Vandiver conceived and put on the books that I thought was a great monument. I think we first funded that during the [Carl Edward] Sanders administration and when I was there, and it's been funded more and more every year. That's something that I thought was wonderful.

The honesty in government legislation that he introduced, had passed, was, I think, a great accomplishment. I think overall the leadership and tone he set for ethics and honesty in government was something that was enduring and that I think he should be remembered for historically very much, because he was the straightest arrow that I've ever dealt with in government. There was not any question about it. And he didn't want to have anything to do with anybody that was not. That's just the way it was, and he's still that way to this good day. [Laughter] He's just that sort of fellow.

Henderson: Now, if you had to flip the coin, looking back, do you see him having any failures, major failures?

Geer: No, I do not see any major failures. As I said initially, he might not have courted the legislature as much as he should have. That's so nebulous it's hard to define. That's something that maybe he should have done more than he did. Ernie had the courage and the ability to say no, and he might not have said no in his blunt manner. He might have said no [and that] no was no. But a governor has to say no more than he can yes. All the time he's got to say no. And that's hard to do and remain popular, hard to do. [Herman] Talmadge was the best at it I ever saw, saying no and you not getting mad with him. [Laughter]

Henderson: In 1966 he enters the campaign to seek the governorship again, has to withdraw. Did you support him in that effort?

Geer: Oh, yes. See, I was lieutenant governor. When I ran for lieutenant governor I envisioned that Ernie Vandiver four years from then would be a candidate for re-election. I knew that, and because of my loyalty to him and because I had gotten started really in state politics with him, I would not have ever entertained the idea of running against Ernie Vandiver.

That just was not--that ain't my cut. So, for that reason, as lieutenant governor, I never planned to run for governor the next term. I knew Ernie was going to run and I was supportive of him all the way.

When he got out, he got sick and had to withdraw. And it was pretty near paying in time. And I was not prepared to run for governor, I didn't think. I knew I was not prepared financially. I had not raised the necessary funds. And you got to start way ahead of time, particularly back then. I didn't have the war chest to just pop in there, and I didn't think I was set to. In hindsight I could have won, but I didn't. But I have no regrets about that, because I never, never would have challenged Ernie Vandiver. 'Cause he was my mentor and I thought too much of him. And I still do, still do.

Henderson: Now, at that time that you were lieutenant governor, did you play any role in his campaign as it's beginning, or were you just supportive of him?

Geer: I was supportive of him, just point blank. I would tell anybody that I was for Governor Vandiver.

Henderson: But you were not involved in his organization per se?

Geer: No, except that--you know I would have been running myself, but I would have been openly for him. There wasn't any question about that.

Henderson: Now let's go to the '72 senatorial race. He enters that race. Do you support him then?

Geer: Yes, I did. I was practicing law here and I was for him and spent a couple days with him in Dougherty County walking around. My recollection is that Ernie was not particularly well financed for that campaign. I don't believe he was, but I was for him. Sam [Samuel

Augustus] Nunn's [Jr.] people called on me and I said, "Well, you can just remember now that I'm a Vandiver man." And I like Sam Nunn fine.

Sam's father and my father had served on the State Board of Education together, and there's nothing wrong with Sam Nunn with me. But I was for Ernie and I told them that and I told Sam that. I said, "If he's not in the run-off"--I thought he would be--"If he's not, I'll be for Sam Nunn." And it turned that way and I was for him. But I was for Vandiver, yeah.

Henderson: Do you have any recollections why he did not make the run-off?

Geer: Out of sight, out of mind too long. And that'll happen to you in politics. Out of sight, out of mind, that's what I think. Plus the fact that I don't recall that Ernie made any--I don't know that he made any great effort in '72. He certainly did not raise the money. I know he didn't do that. I remember his campaign. He had one of these travel buses--what do you call them?

Henderson: Vans?

Geer: No, you sleep in them.

Henderson: Mobile home?

Geer: Motor homes. He and Betty rode around in the motor home. They went to Albany together, just the two of them, in the motor home. You know, when he came to Albany he didn't have delegations waiting on him and he didn't try to do that. He just called me and I met him. And what little we did, you know, it wasn't much. I told him, I said, "Governor, this ain't the kind of campaign we used to run." He just smiled, [unintelligible].

Henderson: All right, let's move to Governor Vandiver. I've got a few questions that I want to ask you about him as a boss, as a governor, as a politician. How would you describe him as

your boss? How was he to work for?

Geer: Fine, just a congenial gentleman. You knew that Ernie expected everybody in the government to do their job, and this was understood. He expected that. And he didn't have to get after you everyday to let you know he expected that. But I--he was a gentleman and I became--the more I worked for him, the more I liked him . . . and respected him.

End of Side Two



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