

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection  
OH Vandiver 05B  
Peter Zack Geer Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson (Part B)  
Date: 11-03-93  
Cassette #452 (6 minutes, Side One only)

**EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON AND MR. GEER**

Side One

Henderson: How would you describe Ernest Vandiver as a politician?

Geer: Well, Ernie certainly had--when he ran for governor and lieutenant governor--he had public charisma. He was a very handsome man. He had coal black curly hair, and he had very penetrating blue eyes, and he was clean cut and well spoken. He had a sincerity about him that was not made up at all; it was genuine. He knew the state well. He knew the history of the state well, well spoken and a good politician.

But I'm not so sure that he enjoyed the gruel and grind of shaking hands all over Georgia every day, all day long. I'm not so sure that all that appealed to him comfortably. [There are] very few people it does appeal to. [Laughter] It's kind of like . . . Senator [Herman Eugene] Talmadge tells [*sic*] a story that after he'd left the Senate . . . . [Pause] It always happens to you--it happens to me now: some fellow runs into you, say in Douglas, Georgia, say, "Hello there, Peter Zack!" Said, "I bet you don't know who I am." Well, hell, you know, you're caught. Herman said some fellow came up to him later, after he'd left the Senate, and he looked him straight in the eye and said, "No, I don't, and I don't give a damn who you are." [Laughter] I never heard Ernie say anything like that, but, you know, it gets pretty, pretty far off.

Henderson: I don't think I can pass up this opportunity. I'm always fascinated with people's recollections of governors as speakers. I've heard [Robert Alwyn] Cheney Griffin talk about Gene [Eugene] Talmadge and Herman Talmadge and these other people. How would you rank

him as a speaker?

Geer: Ernie?

Henderson: Yes.

Geer: Well, better than any of his successors except maybe [Carl Edward] Sanders. Sanders developed and he was a good speaker to start with, a very articulate fellow. Sanders developed and all governors do. The more you speak, the better you get. It's like shooting hoops. I watched them all grow into being better speakers. Ernie, compared to [George Dekle] Busbee or Joe Frank [Harris], or even Zell [Byran Miller]--Zell's developed pretty much from what he once was, speaking, very articulate, Ernie's a better speaker than those folks. He had a better voice, a better demeanor, a better presence. I'm old enough to remember Gene Talmadge speaking. I was at Middle Georgia College [during] his last race for governor, and I've heard Ed [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers speak and, of course, Herman [Talmadge] and [Samuel] Marvin [Griffin, Sr.] and all of them.

Herman Talmadge is the best speaker I've ever heard in the state, without a doubt. With or without notes, his mind is fabulous. Marvin Griffin was a hell of a stump speaker. I mean, he could entertain a crowd, and he could make a tremendous stump speech. He could make a good extemporaneous speech, but not as good as Talmadge, a little bit different in style. I'd say those three, probably the best three that--not counting Gene--the best three that I remember well. Ernie would be in those three. Sanders developed in a few years to be pretty good, particularly with a text. That would be my assessment.

Henderson: Okay. Final question, just your opinion. What is Ernest Vandiver's place in Georgia history?

Geer: That'd purely be an opinion. I'm not a historian. Depends on who writes it, Dr., [laughter] as you well know. I think he's due a high place in Georgia history, among Georgia governors. He handled the state's finances very well. He saved the public school system, or at least he did his part to save it. He ran an efficient administration, and probably his contribution is in the fact that he didn't have the public school system disrupted over the issue of desegregation. And I think for that he's entitled to lasting credit. That's what I think about it.

He's entitled to credit for being an honorable and honest governor, a sincere governor. But history usually gives you one paragraph or one line, and if it was that, it would be the school thing, I would think. That'd be my judgment about it. And I suspect history will judge him that way. He had a pretty good press when he was governor and has had since, probably historians will treat him all right. [I] hope they do.

Henderson: I want to thank you for taking this time to grant this interview.

Geer: Well, I've enjoyed it.

Henderson: I have enjoyed it very much.

End of Side One

END OF INTERVIEW

**Name Index****B**

Busbee, George Dekle, 2

**G**

Griffin, Robert Alwyn (Cheney), 1

Griffin, Samuel Marvin, Sr., 2

**H**

Harris, Joe Frank, 2

**M**

Miller, Zell Bryan, 2

**R**

Rivers, Eurith Dickinson (Ed), 2

**S**

Sanders, Carl Edward, 2

**T**

Talmadge, Eugene (Gene), 1, 2

Talmadge, Herman Eugene, 1, 2

**V**

Vandiver, Samuel Ernest, Jr., 1, 2

