

Samuel Ernest Vandiver Jr. Collection  
OH Vandiver 09  
Henry Getzen Neal Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson  
Date: 11-26-93  
Cassette # 456 (85 Minutes)

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

Side One

Henderson: My name is Dr. Hal Henderson. I am interviewing Mr. Henry G. [Getzen] Neal, Executive Secretary of the Board of Regents, in his office in Atlanta on November 26, 1993. Good morning, Mr. Neal.

Neal: Good morning, sir.

Henderson: First of all, let me begin by asking you to describe your relationship with [Samuel] Ernest Vandiver prior to his becoming governor.

Neal: Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote "there's no friend like an old friend who has shared our morning days and no greeting like his welcome and no homage like his praise." It's been my good fortune to have known Ernest Vandiver as a personal friend for over thirty years. I had known him when he was a senior and I was a freshman or sophomore in college [at the University of Georgia]. He was what we called a "big man on the campus" (BMOC). He was very prominent in campus affairs, and he was selected as a member of a number of leadership organizations on the campus. I believe he was a member of Sphinx, which is the highest non-scholastic recognition of any student on the campus. Only one or two students are selected each year.

Prior to his campaign for lieutenant governor in 1954, I knew Ernie as a friend, but I did not know him intimately. His brother-in-law Bobby [Robert Lee] Russell [Jr.] was a very good friend of mine. We were classmates in law school, and he kept me advised as to Ernie's

political ambitions from the time he ran for and was elected a mayor of Lavonia. As I recall, he was one of the youngest mayors in the country at that time. Later, he [Ernie] became prominently identified with state politics. He served as adjutant general of Georgia under Governor [Herman Eugene] Talmadge. He served in that position with honor and dignity, as he commanded the State National Guard. So, I knew him for some time prior to his entry into the lieutenant governor's race, but mostly as a friend and not so much as a politician.

I supported him actively in the lieutenant governor's race and later on in the governor's race. As lieutenant governor, I believe that his opposition was a man by the name of Billy [William K.] Barrett. There may have been one or two others in the race, but Ernie had a very successful campaign and was elected.

Henderson: Okay. In that campaign for the lieutenant governorship, what was your role? Was it just a supporter, or did you play a role in his organization?

Neal: No, I had no part in his organization at that time. I simply supported him in my area [Thomson, Georgia and surrounding communities]. I was practicing law in Thomson, and I had a number of friends throughout the area, a six-county area where I practiced [the Toombs Judicial Circuit]. I actively sought their support for Ernie in the lieutenant governor's race, as well as the governor's race in 1958. We [my friends and I] were very much interested in seeing him elected lieutenant governor and governor.

Henderson: Going back to your days at the University of Georgia, did you have any indications then that he might be aspiring to political office in the state?

Neal: Not really. Though he was very active, as I said, in campus affairs and campus politics, he was a good-looking young man who was well known and respected on the campus.

He made friends easily, especially in law school, where he was enrolled when I first knew him. I may have served on the Interfraternity Council with him, and I believe that he was president of the Interfraternity Council at one time.

Henderson: I see. Okay. Let's go to his time as lieutenant governor. Of course, at that time [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.] was governor. And during that period of time, there is deterioration in the relationship between the lieutenant governor and the governor. Do you have any recollections about their relationship during that period of time?

Neal: No, sir, not of my own knowledge.

Henderson: Okay. Now, at that time were you involved in any way with his being lieutenant governor? Did you serve in any capacity with him or for him? Or you were practicing law?

Neal: I was practicing law in Thomson full-time.

Henderson: Were you involved in any way in the 1958 controversy in the legislature about money for rural roads? There was a big effort by Marvin Griffin to increase the funding of rural roads, and Lieutenant Governor Vandiver led the fight against it. Were you involved in that controversy?

Neal: Only peripherally. It was all in the press. I thought that Ernie's position on the rural roads issue was sound, and again I contacted our friends in my district, in my area, the Toombs Judicial Circuit and surrounding counties, and sought their support and urged them to contact their representatives and ask them to vote against that particular legislation. To me it [the rural roads issue] appeared to be more of a political football.

Henderson: What was your role in his 1958 gubernatorial campaign?

Neal: Well, in 1958 I was still practicing law in the same area of the state, and my role in that campaign was very limited, although we did put on a big barbecue for him in Thomson. We had several thousand people at that barbecue. In those days the political candidates often held barbecues across the state. Ernie had not had one in our area, and I suggested that we do so. He consented and did; I think it was very successful. He made a fine speech and a very good impression on everyone present. I would guess there were around two to three thousand people at that barbecue. That was probably the most significant thing that I did in his '58 campaign

Henderson: Now during that campaign Mr. Vandiver will make a statement referred to as the "no, not one" statement. Did you have any influence or any say-so in whether he should make that statement or not make the statement?

Neal: No, sir, I did not.

Henderson: In retrospect, do you think that statement should have been made?

Neal: Well, I seriously doubt it. It was a statement which may have been more politically appropriate at that time than it would be now. I've heard it said by others that it was controversial even then. I don't recall exactly when it was said, but I have heard that it may have been made at a rally in Gainesville, Georgia. I had nothing to do with it.

Henderson: He wins an overwhelming victory in 1958. He carries all but three counties. What do you attribute that victory to?

Neal: Well, 'course Ernie was a hard campaigner. He was an attractive candidate with an excellent record in state politics as lieutenant governor and as adjutant general. He was well known and highly respected throughout the state. He had a group of young, vigorous, and

active friends and supporters whom he had known at the University of Georgia, as well as others in the National Guard and legislators who served with him when he was lieutenant governor [and presiding officer] in the state senate. So he had a broad spectrum of supporters throughout the state.

Henderson: Okay. What was your position with the Vandiver administration?

Neal: In those days it was called assistant attorney general appointed by Attorney General Eugene Cook, I was assigned to the governor's office at the request of the governor. Today I think it's called executive counsel, and the law has been changed so that the governor appoints his counsel now.

Henderson: Why did he pick you for that particular position?

Neal: Bobby Russell, his brother-in-law, and I had some discussion about it and I told Bobby that I would be interested. I wanted to come to work with the Governor for a couple of years and get some first-hand experience on Capitol Hill and know where to go to perhaps respond to the needs of my clients in Thomson.

Henderson: What did you do in that particular role?

Neal: My duties were varied. I advised and counseled with the governor on matters pertaining to the law or of a legal nature, including approval of most agreements, contracts, deeds and other conveyances and similar documents which required the signature of the governor. I assisted the bill-drafting unit in the General Assembly in drafting measures which the governor might want to sponsor. I acted as a liaison between the various department heads and the administration floor leaders and the governor, of course, in the House and Senate. I prepared a number of executive orders which covered a multitude of matters such as

extraditions, sales of surplus property of the state, appointment of judges, and district attorneys.

In those days they were called solicitors general, and appointment of other constitutional and statutory officers as necessary.

Perhaps the most difficult task was to review [in a limited time span] and advise the governor with respect to the contents of the bills and resolutions passed by the General Assembly. I also assisted the governor in drafting veto measures. In those days we had about six hundred extraditions annually for individuals sought by Georgia from another state or residents of Georgia sought by a sister state. I was in charge of handling and processing extradition papers, and I assisted in the preparation of the governor's testimony before the Congress and the General Assembly on legislation and how it might affect Georgia. And I answered all correspondence of a legal nature (100 or more letters each week), and then there was the day by day advising and counseling with the governor and the other members of his immediate staff on matters affecting the Governor's Office.

Henderson: Who were the governor's closest advisors that he turned to when he needed some solid advice?

Neal: Governor Vandiver had the very highest respect for the opinion of United States Senator [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.]. And I would say that he valued his advice, possibly as much or more so than any other friend. And then [there was] his brother-in-law Bobby Russell, who had managed his gubernatorial campaign. Peter Zack Geer [Jr.], who was the governor's executive secretary, was active in advising the governor on all matters, and our duties overlapped to a degree. [Geer] served very well with honor and distinction in that capacity. And his brilliant press secretary [Walter Odum Brooks, Jr.], whom he consulted him regularly

with respect to matters having to do with the press and political issues. Griffin [Boyette] Bell was the unpaid governor's chief of staff; it's an honorary title, but he was a very close friend of the governor. The governor valued his advice. Then in the legislature we had very able leaders, Frank [Starling] Twitty, Carl [Edward] Sanders, George L. [Leon] Smith [II], and a number of other leaders in the senate and house, who discussed legislative matters with the governor almost daily.

Henderson: Did he turn to Senator Talmadge for advice and counsel?

Neal: Yes, he did. And I apologize for leaving him out. Senator Talmadge was a very good friend, personally and politically, of Governor Vandiver's. They respected each other. Talmadge was in the U. S. Senate at that time. We did not see him as often as we would have liked, but he was certainly a respected advisor.

Henderson: Would you describe for me Governor Vandiver's lobbying activities with the legislators to try to get his legislation passed?

Neal: Well, he worked principally through his legislative leaders in the House and Senate. George L. Smith was the speaker of the House. Frank Twitty, as I recall, was his floor leader in the House, and Carl Sanders was his floor leader and later speaker pro tem of the Senate. Garland Byrd, the lieutenant governor, was cooperative and helpful. They did an excellent job in advising the governor on legislation and discussing such matters with him and possibly asking the governor to speak to a particular legislator with regard to a particular bill. As I recall, Governor Vandiver never lost a legislative measure in which he was interested in. He was a very effective chief executive. He would discuss specific legislation with legislators, and that happened frequently. He always tried to explain legislation in which he was interested.

He was able to tell the legislators why he sponsored or desired passage of a certain bill. He was very effective in his state of the state address and other messages that he sent to the General Assembly. He did an excellent job of guiding his legislation through both houses. As I said, I don't believe that he ever lost a bill in which he had a genuine interest. And that must be somewhat of a record. Others before and after him have failed to pass administrative bills. Ernie never lost one to my knowledge.

Henderson: Would he personally call legislators up, to lobby them, or would he invite them down to the governor's office or have them out for dinner at the mansion?

Neal: Yes, I think he did. However, I know of no "pork barrel projects" that he approved. Ernie has a very strong personality. He is a gentleman of the highest integrity. Most of the legislators at that time supported and respected him. On some occasions, he would ask legislators to come down to his office and discuss a bill with him. Most of the time he worked through his leaders in the House and Senate. And, of course, he conferred with them [the legislative leaders] frequently, sometimes on a daily basis when the General Assembly was in session.

Henderson: Does it make it easy for him to prevail because he carried every county but three in his election?

Neal: I don't think there's any question about that. He did carry all but three counties, and I believe his opposition was a gentleman by the name of [William Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.] from Ty Ty, Georgia, or somewhere in that area. Mr. Bodenhamer was a fine man. Ernie was much better known than he was, and he had been more prominently identified with statewide politics.

Henderson: One of the major administration bills was one entitled "Honesty in Government."

Neal: I believe that was House Bill One, introduced in his first year, 1959.

Henderson: Why was that needed and what did it do?

Neal: Yes, there had been a lot of reports of dishonesty in the previous administration. That bill addressed such issues. It was a very comprehensive bill, most of which, I believe, is still on the books. It dealt with honesty in government generally and prescribed certain standards, and certain activities which would be prohibited and could possibly result in some criminal and civil penalties.

Henderson: Were you involved in the drafting of that legislation?

Neal: No, sir, I was not. That was drafted . . . the initial bill, I think, was drafted by the attorney general's office or by the legislative bill drafting unit. It was amended several times by legislative leaders. I was familiar with it, and, as I said, it was needed, in my opinion, because there had been a number of charges made during the campaign. I think as a result of that legislation and other bills, other criminal penalties on the books, that some of the active members of the previous administration did not fare too well in charges brought against them. I do not remember who they were, but I do remember it was an interesting time insofar as atoning for past conduct.

Henderson: There was a special division set up in the law department to investigate alleged improper conduct of officials in the Griffin administration. Do you recall any of the activities of that particular division?

Neal: I recall that Bob [Robert Howell] Hall, who had been an assistant attorney

general in the attorney general's office for many years and a professor of law at Emory Law School, was named by the governor to head up that division. And there were six or seven competent attorneys who assisted Bob during the investigative process of the previous administration. Bob is presently [1994] a distinguished United States District Judge.

Henderson: Do you recall that anyone with the Griffin administration ever went to prison because of these alleged criminal activities?

Neal: I am not certain whether they went to prison, but there were a number of charges and convictions, yes. There was broad coverage of such activities in the press at the time.

Henderson: What was the relationship between Attorney General Cook and Governor Vandiver?

Neal: Good, as far as I'm concerned. I was appointed by Mr. Cook, and I cannot recall any serious incidents between the attorney general and the governor. I respected Mr. Cook. I think he was a qualified attorney general. He was, I am told, a first honor graduate of his law class at Mercer, and he was very active as attorney general. He worked hard and long. I have nothing but high marks to give him.

Henderson: Do you recall any other, or was there any difficulties that Governor Vandiver had with any high-ranking state official? You know, in the past there have been some confrontations between governors and heads of the state department of transportation or whatever. Was there any conflict like that with the governor and a high official?

Neal: I don't know what you mean by conflict. Of course, there are always differences of opinion between one who may have been appointed by previous administrations or who may have served in such administrations. And there were some conflicts of opinion, but I cannot

recall whether there were any serious difficulties. As far as I know, the department heads that were appointed by Governor Vandiver as well as the those who may have been appointed by some previous governor all did their best to cooperate and work with the Governor.

Henderson: There was an Economy and Reorganization Study Commission. Are you familiar with the activities of that commission?

Neal: Generally, yes. As I recall, Bill [William Redding] Bowdoin was the chairman of that commission. And it was principally designed to reduce the cost of government and eliminate waste. It was designed to increase the efficiency of government by looking over things that we could do without and perhaps adopting new legislation to govern the activities of departments and streamline them and bring them up to date. Bill did an excellent job and he had a very active commission.

Henderson: During the 1960 presidential campaign, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is arrested in Georgia. What was Governor Vandiver's role in getting Dr. King released, and did you play any role in that matter?

Neal: About all I know is what I've read in the papers and heard from Ernie, but I'd rather you asked him that question.

Henderson: Okay. There is talk that President-elect [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy would nominate Vandiver for the position of secretary of the army. Governor eventually withdraws himself from consideration. Were you involved in any way in that?

Neal: No, sir, but I knew about it. I was very much concerned that Governor Vandiver would be leaving office because he was doing such a great job for Georgia I didn't want to see him leave.

Henderson: Did he ever directly discuss this matter with you?

Neal: Other than to say that he didn't think that he was interested. He did not say that he had been offered the appointment, but he gave me the impression that if it were offered that he may have turned it down because he had run for governor, and he didn't want to go back on the trust that the people had placed in him to be their chief executive for four years.

Henderson: In the 1960 legislative session the Sibley Commission was created. What was it, and why was it created, and do you remember any of its recommendations?

Neal: The Sibley Commission was chaired by Mr. John [Adams] Sibley, Sr. Griffin Bell played a prominent role in the establishment of the Sibley Commission. I think that the results of the work of that commission was most effective. Mr. Sibley was an unusually attractive and talented man. I went to one or two of those meetings, and the general feeling across the state was that there should be "no integration." Through the force of his personality and sense of his humor, Mr. Sibley was able to convince most of his audiences that integration was required by law and that we had to follow the law. He deserves a lot of credit for our being able to escape many serious problems that could have arisen during that time. Griffin Bell, could tell you much more about that than could I.

Henderson: Do you recall any division among the governor's advisors relative to whether the Sibley Commission should have been created?

Neal: No, sir. I do not.

Henderson: Governor Vandiver has to deal with the desegregation issue. If you'll recall, in January of 1961 a federal judge orders admission of two blacks to the University of Georgia. What is the dilemma from a legal standpoint that Governor Vandiver faces with this

court order?

Neal: He was required by the constitution and laws of Georgia to cut off the funds of any public institution that integrated the schools or colleges. That was his dilemma. On the one hand, he was required by law and the constitution to cut off the funds, and on the other hand, he felt very sincerely that it would not be in the best interest of Georgia to do that.

Henderson: Now, I understand that on January 8 there is a secret meeting involving the Board of Regents, key legislators, and the president of the University of Georgia. Were you in attendance at that meeting? Are you familiar with what went on at that particular meeting?

Neal: Yes, sir. I was in attendance. We met over here in the Regents' boardroom, on a Sunday afternoon as I recall, and the governor outlined his position. I do not recall whether the Sibley Commission had been appointed at that time. But it was a very amiable meeting, and the issues were discussed openly and freely.

Henderson: What was the general consensus of the members of the board at that time? To accept integration or to resist it?

Neal: The consensus was to cooperate with the governor in solving what was indeed a very serious and perplexing problem. I do not recall that there was any serious dissenter. The attitude was "let's get behind the governor and support him in what he feels is in the best interest of the people of this state."

Henderson: During this whole period of time, does the governor ever turn to you and say, "Mr. Neal, what do you recommend that I do?"

Neal: No, sir, not often. We discussed it frequently along with the other confidants that I mentioned earlier, but on issues of that nature he would want to get the advice and counsel of

all of his other close friends who were also familiar with that issue.

Henderson: Then I understand that there was a second meeting, this time at the governor's mansion, where the governor brought in a large number of key state officials, and the issue was discussed there. And he wanted to get the feeling of attendees [as to] which direction he should go. Were you in attendance at that meeting?

Neal: No, sir. I was later fully advised about that meeting. However, I was not present.

Henderson: As legal counsel to the governor, then you never per se made a recommendation to him as to what legally he should do?

Neal: No, sir, though as I recall, we did discuss it often. Governor Vandiver was a lawyer. He was familiar with the law. He understood the law. He knew what the constitution and the statutes required, and the issues concerned him greatly.

Henderson: What course of action did he recommend to the legislature as far as resolving this issue, and why do you think he recommended what he did?

Neal: I do not specifically remember exactly what happened or why he moved the way that he did, except that he felt honestly and sincerely that it was in the best interests of the people of Georgia. As I recall, we had a night meeting of the legislature and he addressed that issue. I believe it was the so-called "freedom of choice" plan which passed overwhelmingly.

Henderson: When he came out in favor of keeping the university open, do you think he saw that as the ending of his political career in Georgia?

Neal: Not really but I'm sure that he must have felt that the action at that time would not help him in future campaigns for governor or the U. S. Senate.

Henderson: Do you recall, was there any major leader in the state who opposed the governor

as far as keeping the university open?

Neal: No, I do not. I was later advised, but not of my own knowledge, that [former] Governor [Carl] Sanders and Frank Twitty were two of the group who were opposed to defying the integration order of the federal court. I don't think Ernie ever really seriously considered that. He has deep respect for the courts, and I don't think he ever would have defied the court order. He may have asked the court to make a determination as to his authority under the existing laws of Georgia and the federal statutes.

Henderson: What was the role of Mr. [Ernest] Freeman Leverett in the school desegregation crisis?

Neal: Freeman was a very active assistant attorney general, a highly intelligent, young attorney, who worked for Mr. [Eugene] Cook as an assistant attorney general. He, along with some others who were designated by the attorney general to assist him, were charged with handling, in court and otherwise, the substantive legal issues of segregation and integration.

Henderson: In the 1961 session of the legislature, there is a major battle between the governor and the legislature over the budgetary powers of the governor. Do you recall that fight?

Neal: Yes, I recall that there was a strong difference of opinion between Frank Twitty, the governor's floor leader, and the governor and perhaps others in the House and Senate as to whether the governor should retain the control over the state budget. By control, I mean that the governor submits his budget to the legislature for approval, and most of the time his budget would be adopted. But it was a battle over the expenditure of state funds, between the governor who proposed the budget and the legislature who appropriated the funds. And that's about all

that I recall. I was not directly involved in that particular battle. I do know that it was a very serious issue with him.

Henderson: In 1962 the county unit system was challenged in the federal courts, and Governor Vandiver calls a special session. Were you involved in his efforts to try to save the county unit system?

Neal: I knew what was going on, but I did not prepare any legislation. I sat in on most of the meetings as an interested observer, made notes so that I could discuss it at a later time with the governor. But I was not directly involved in discussing the matter with legislators, except to state succinctly the governor's position. The governor met regularly with legislators with regard to that issue.

Henderson: Did he ever turn to you and say, "Legally, what should I do to save the county unit system?"

Neal: No, sir.

Henderson: What do you think were the major accomplishments of the Vandiver administration?

Neal: Well, I think his record as governor is very impressive, was then and is now-- even outstanding. But the highlights of his term to me were [that] he exposed corruption in government by seeking out those who had betrayed the trust given to them by the people, [and] perhaps more importantly, he restored the old fashioned virtues of honesty and integrity to the governor's office. As we discussed earlier, his first piece of legislation, House Bill One, in 1959, became known as [the] "honesty in government bill," which is still on the books today.

He was very conscious of widespread waste in state government. He abolished more

than a hundred boards and bureaus and commissions which served no useful purpose but were very expensive to maintain. With his wife's, Betty's [Sybil Elizabeth Russell Vandiver], encouragement and persuasion, he revamped the state's mental health program, and we're still reaping benefits from that today because Georgia is recognized, I think, as a national leader in the field. He was responsible for building about twenty-two or twenty-three vocational, educational schools all over Georgia to give young students the opportunity to learn a trade or vocation without going to college.

Most significantly, I think, when he entered office in 1959, our state government was in a financial bind. And I'm told it was about a hundred million dollars in debt at that time. That was an awful lot of money then. And when his term expired in January of 1963, he left a substantial surplus in the coffers of the state for his successor. He did this, I think without, to my knowledge, any tax increase. Ernie knew how to manage money, and he did an excellent job of it. He also was very conscious of the contribution that could be made by new industry. He encouraged the legislative leaders to develop and establish industries in rural areas whenever possible. He sponsored the construction or reconstruction of more than six thousand miles of the state's primary road system in order to move the workers from county to county to the places where the jobs were.

Succinctly, to me, one word describes Ernie, and that is "integrity." I never saw him waver on doing what he thought was right, and you never had to say, "Governor, do the right thing." You knew he was going to do it. His real test came, I think, as we have discussed, in '62, on the integration issue. You will recall that in 1954 the Supreme Court of the United States required the desegregation of all public schools nationwide. Ernie worked quietly and

effectively with the dignity befitting of his office, and he was able to bring about the integration of the public schools in Georgia. He upheld the rule of law, rather than condone chaos and confusion. Changes came. Institutions and social structures were transformed without bayonets or bullets. Mostly because of his strong leadership we were able to arrive at a peaceful transition to what I personally consider to be a more just and equitable society today.

#### End of Side One

#### Side Two

Henderson: All right, sir.

Neal: I would just like to add that Vandiver's courageous actions in dealing with the problems of integration which probably 95 percent of the people in Georgia supported furnished inspiration to other governors and perhaps even to other governors in the South. Every chapter in his life from his college days until now reflected his steady character and his strong leadership. To me his public service established him as a man of high principle, impeccable integrity, and determined commitment. He was scrupulously honest, admired and respected, not only by his staff but by everyone who knew him. He courageously fought to enforce the rule of law and was not daunted in the face of political adversity. His disciplined leadership in those trying times was, I think, an example for other states to follow. I hold him in highest esteem, admiration, and affection. He always managed to "do the right thing."

Henderson: What do you look upon as his major failures as governor?

Neal: I think his major failure was that he was not reelected four years later when he ran again and was required for health reasons to withdraw from that race. [Laughter]

Henderson: Would it be correct to call him an education governor? Did education in

Georgia benefit--besides the issue of desegregation and segregation--but did education benefit because he was governor?

Neal: I know for a fact that he appointed some very excellent board members who espoused his philosophy of education. I know for a fact, as I said a moment ago, that he was active in the support of vocational education. I know for a fact that he realized that the future of the state was tied closely to education. I recently had the privilege of assisting in the dedication of an elementary school in his home county of Franklin several months ago. He's held in the highest esteem by those in Lavonia who know him best. There were several hundred people present that day to endorse and support the dedication of the *S. Ernest Vandiver Elementary School*.

Henderson: You saw the governor on a day-to-day basis in the running of state government. How would you describe his stewardship in that responsibility?

Neal: I think we need more leaders like him. He was a man of honor who was willing to risk his political life on the altar of public opinion. He defended the ideals of freedom, of equal justice under the law, and of [a] free and open society upon which our nation is founded. I'm reminded of a quote from Mother Teresa [of Calcutta] who said one time, "God will not force us to do good. We must choose to do good." In my opinion, Ernie Vandiver at a young age chose to do good, and all of us have reaped the benefits of that decision.

Henderson: Okay. How would you describe his work habits as governor? Did he come in early and stay late? Did he put in a few hours at the office? Was he a workaholic? How would you describe his work habits?

Neal: He was very hardworking for a governor. He couldn't accomplish the things that

he did without working hard. He would often take a lot of work home with him to review at the mansion, because at the office he was constantly interrupted by telephone calls and visits.

Incidentally, I omitted for the most part Walter Brooks's name when I named his close confidants. He is now deceased. Certainly Walter Brooks, who was the Governor's press secretary at the time, was a very close friend and confidant. He was a brilliant man who had earlier been identified with the Talmadge administration. To me, he was the best speechwriter and press secretary that I have known. He had a way with words. His role as press secretary played a very significant role in the Vandiver administration.

The three of us [Pete Zack Geer, Walter Brooks and myself] were in the office when the governor had his heart attack. The press was waiting for a press conference. They were all outside. Ernie expressed some discomfort in his neck and shoulder. All of us suggested that if he should go to see his doctor at Piedmont [Hospital]. It did not clear up and he went to see his doctor, who pronounced it as a heart attack.

Henderson: Were you on a daily basis in contact with the governor?

Neal: Yes, sir.

Henderson: What was a typical day like in the life of Ernest Vandiver? What time did he come in to work? What time did he leave to go home?

Neal: Well, he would come in around eight-thirty to nine o'clock and probably leave anywhere--depending on whether the legislature was in session--after lunch about three or four o'clock. He had so many telephone calls and so many interruptions in that office he often left a little early to work at the mansion. He was always available to the staff by telephone. He was a very intense person, and I think that his intensity probably contributed to his heart attack. He

was probably a type "A" personality. He wanted to get things done. He was a student of state and federal politics. I know when I first came up here, I said, "Ernie, we ought to do this and we ought to do that and we ought to do the other." And he said, "Wait a minute, Henry, don't try to move so fast. In politics one must move by the inch and not by the yard." How true that proved to be in nearly everything we did. He was my political mentor.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a governor? Does he fit in the category of being a strong governor? A weak governor? Someplace in-between?

Henderson: He definitely was a strong governor, a strong and persuasive governor and a great debater. To my knowledge, he always put the interests of the people first and tried his very best to "keep the faith" with those who elected him.

Henderson: What was his style of dealing with people? Did he have a laid-back style or was he relatively aggressive, very persuasive? How would you describe him?

Neal: Somewhere in between. He was not exactly . . . his certainly was not really a laid-back style because he had so many things to do and so little time as the saying goes. To my knowledge, he was never discourteous to any legislator or any other person. He was persuasive and sometimes aggressive. I recall one incident. We were having a meeting in the governor's office, an important one about some subject, and all of a sudden the back door to the governor's office opened, and in walked this youngster who was about eight or ten years of age, with a big bag of peanuts on his arm. Nobody said a word. This little boy walked right up to the governor and looked him in the eye and said, "Governor, you want to buy some peanuts?" [Laughter] Well, the governor smiled and bought a package of peanuts for everyone present. There were about fifteen people there. He bought him out, and that little kid went running out of the room,

smiling and happy. I think that tells a lot about the man. He was softhearted too!

Henderson: Did you ever see the governor agitated or angry with a lawmaker or public official? Did he ever express his anger at someone?

Neal: Only once. He was calling members of the legislature over the weekend seeking support for some bill, and the governor explained the bill to him. And he said, "All right, governor, if I see you're going to win, I'll vote for the bill." Well, the governor sort of lost his temper at that--as any normal person would have--and hung up the telephone. [Laughter]

Henderson: Now, you worked for the governor for his entire administration?

Neal: That's correct.

Henderson: How would you describe him as someone to work for?

Neal: Excellent. He expected everyone to do his or her job. If you had some personal problems you wanted to discuss with him, he was always ready to do so. He was sensitive to the needs of his staff and other employees.

Henderson: You have already discussed this to some degree, but I would like to come back to the question. How would you describe him as a politician?

Neal: He was a good politician. His wife Betty was probably a better politician than he was. He knew how to greet people, he was courteous, and he was willing to help if he could. He was not a perennial joke teller, but his character always came through in extended conversations. Like I said, he was going to do the right thing. And if you happened to be on that side, he'd help you, but if he thought you were not, he would let you know. There was no backstabbing.

There was another funny incident. One of the legislators voted against a legislative bill

in the House one morning after an impassioned speech asking his constituents to defeat the bill.

And later on that day after lunch, he went back to the House about four o'clock and took the well and spoke in favor of the bill. And somebody asked him why he did that. And he said, "Well, during the noon hour the governor explained the bill to me." [Laughter]

Henderson: How would you describe him as a speaker?

Neal: He was a good speaker. He had the right inflections in his voice, he spoke clearly and distinctly, and commanded the attention of the audience. He was not without humor, but that was not one of his strong points. He would always tell a few stories, and he liked to laugh. But I would hate to debate him. He was a strong speaker with a deep resonant voice that you could hear even without the use of microphones.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a political campaigner?

Neal: We alluded to that a little bit earlier, one of the things that I spoke of earlier, too: he was determined. If he got in the middle of a political fight, he was determined to win, not by any means necessary, but determined to win it by the sheer force of his personality, to be able to persuade and convince those who opposed him. He was a good "stump man." And the speech he made in Thomson, Georgia, [at] the rally that I sponsored, was a very good one. And I believe that probably 80 percent of the people there voted for him, maybe more. They all came up afterward and told me how much they liked him and what a good candidate he was and they intended to vote for him.

Henderson: How would you categorize his political philosophy? [Pause]

Neal: Conservative. As I said earlier, I think it was to do the right thing, or what he conceived to be the right thing at the time. He has impeccable integrity. He was very insistent

that those of us in his office follow his example, which was to work hard, to be effective, and not violate the law or engage in conflict of interests.

Henderson: In 1960 there is a presidential election. What was his role in that election, if any?

Neal: As I recall, I think that's the one where President Kennedy was nominated, in Los Angeles. While I did not go to that meeting, I watched a most of it on TV. Governor Vandiver took a very active role. I later learned that our delegation went there to support Mr. [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, and that they very actively supported him. Our delegation was disappointed that he didn't get the nomination. I was told that Bobby [Robert Francis] Kennedy addressed the Georgia delegation. The state [election results] came in and Kennedy had carried Georgia by the largest percentage margin of any other state. I believe Griffin Bell managed that campaign along with Jim L. [James Lester] Gillis, Jr. As a result of their effective leadership in that campaign, Kennedy carried Georgia by the largest margin of any state in the country. Kennedy was very proud of that, as was the Governor.

Henderson: Let me go back to Governor Vandiver being governor. A governor back then could serve only four years.

Neal: Correct.

Henderson: Is there any urgency the first year or the second year to get your legislative program through, realizing that Governor Vandiver is a lame duck governor and he may have less influence the third or the fourth year over the legislature? Or does that play a role in his legislative. . . ?

Neal: I think that's a political realism. And they do probably sponsor more; all

governors probably sponsor more legislation in the first and second year than any other year. House Bill One was a very important bill, which was the legislative foundation for the Vandiver administration; he fought corruption in government and would not tolerate conflicts of interest. He wanted to, as it were, to put government back on the right track. But yes, probably we had far more administrative bills in the first year than we did in the second, third, or fourth years.

Henderson: If I could pursue that, when do you start working for the governor? Prior to his assuming the office, or is there some groundwork being done way before that time?

Neal: Well, I decided after discussions with Bobby [Russell] that I would come up here probably early in January [1959]. But he did not give me any assigned tasks except maybe a few to contact this person or that person or legislator. Yes, it was an extremely busy time. He was trying to decide who his department heads would be. He was trying to get in touch with his constituents, to contact the legislative constituents in that area to see who they might recommend. He wanted to make sure that they [the legislators] had a role in the selection of those who would be leading state government from the inside.

Henderson: Did he ever indicate to you what was his most unpleasant part of being governor, whether it's the continuous telephone calling or the meeting of people, or did he see anything as being unpleasant in being governor?

Neal: I think the pressures of the office. Some people can handle pressure better than others. Ernie was so scrupulously honest that the pressures of having to say "no" so often to demands of legislators got to him. The pressure of dealing with the tremendously important issues which faced him, the deficit, integration, and the other problems we discussed. The things that he felt obligated to accomplish, were weighing on his mind all the time. He began

laying the groundwork for the problems which he would face as governor before and after his election.

Henderson: In 1966 he enters the governor's race but has to withdraw because of his heart condition.

Neal: Oh, '66. Yes, he did.

Henderson: Due to health reasons. Did you support him prior to his withdrawal from that campaign?

Neal: Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, I was with him at the Dinkler Plaza Hotel when he withdrew. I knew that we were losing an excellent public servant. It's interesting, I think, that one of the national pollsters--I believe it was Lou Harris, who told me during the process of the Sanders campaign he came down here to conduct a poll for Sanders, as I'm told, and he said that in the course of conducting other polls he would always ask, "Would they vote for the incumbent governor again?" And, if I'm not mistaken, about 60 percent of those interviewed said yes, they would vote for Vandiver again. The pollster made the statement that it was the highest he had ever seen in any state in which he had asked the same question. He said, "Your governor could be re-elected if he could run again."

Henderson: Let's go to the '72 senatorial race. He enters that race, and he fails to get in the run-off. Why do you think he was not able to win that election?

Neal: 'Course, in '72 I was over here [the Regent's Office] as executive secretary and I did not participate in that race except to vote for Ernie. I really don't know except [that] it had been about ten years since he had been out of office. And it's awfully difficult for any person to come back after he's been out of office that long. Other governors have found that to be the

case. There were some other good candidates that were running. But I would attribute it to the fact that Vandiver's name was not as well known ten years later as it had been, not nearly as well known [as it had been] because of his previous associations and experiences in other political offices, adjutant general, lieutenant governor, and so on.

Most politicians, I think, have the mistaken impression that they will be remembered by a latter day voting populace. It's ironic, I think, that President [Harry S] Truman went out of office probably as the most unpopular president and today he's probably the most popular past president we've had in my lifetime at least. Truman could probably run a good race today if we could resurrect him because his image has been increased since he passed away. But I think when the history of Georgia is written that the two best governors, in my lifetime at least, have been the two with whom I have had the honor and privilege of serving, Ernie Vandiver and Carl Sanders. It was just a good era in politics. Both of them were scrupulously honest, hard workers, dedicated to doing a good job. So I was very fortunate in having the opportunity to work with both of them. I had not really planned on it. Carl Sanders and I were in law school together and I had known him quite well in private law practice.

Henderson: If I could go back to the days of the University of Georgia. Now, when you were there you were a freshman? Is that right? And he was a senior.

Neal: I think that's about right. I was a freshman in college and he was a sophomore in law school. Ernie's about four or five years older than I am. He was a junior or senior or maybe in the law school. He had, as I recall, already finished undergraduate school.

Henderson: So while there did you see him on a regular basis to talk with him? Did you know him except as a figure on campus?

Neal: That's about it. I knew that he was a prominent student. He was written up in the *Red and Black* frequently. He was a good-looking fellow who dated the most beautiful women.

Henderson: Someone told me that every time they saw Ernie Vandiver he always had a suit on or at least a tie. Do you recall that?

Neal: He was not a "fancy dresser," but he was certainly conscious of his appearance; I don't recall whether or not he had a suit on.

Henderson: Mr. Neal, do you recall any humorous correspondence that the governor received or that you received during the governor's administration?

Neal: Yes, we received several hundred letters a day. And part of my responsibilities was to assist in answering that correspondence. I recall one letter that we received following . . . well, the governor had sent out a large number of materials during the Cuban Missile Crisis telling everybody what to do in the event of an atomic attack. It went out through the civil defense department, and as a former adjutant general he was very much interested. So all this material went out, and we'd get a lot of correspondence back thanking the governor for having advised this or that or whatever. Some of the people started constructing bomb shelters all over the state. We received this one little card from some fellow down in South Georgia. [It] said, "Dear Governor, thank you for the information about the atomic bomb." He said, "I think you ought to tell everybody that there are three kinds of atomic bombs: small, medium, and where-is-everybody?" [Laughter]

I remember another incident during the first session of the legislature. A call came to the governor from Spain; he was in the legislative chambers just finishing a speech to the legislature. I was waiting for him when he came out and said, "You better hurry down here

quick because somebody's trying to get you from Spain." He said, "Who is it?" I said, "I don't know, maybe the Generalissimo; I'm not sure." So he went down, and he said, "Hello." The fellow on the other end said he needed the governor's help in getting him out of the army. [Laughter] So we had a good laugh about that one.

Some of the other letters, for example, that we got, we had one fellow who wrote and said, "Dear Governor, in LaGrange, Georgia" . . . let me see how it went . . . "Dear Governor, in LaGrange, Georgia, they have a mind-reading machine. And they are letting everybody that wants to go down there and read my mind. Governor, please go down there and make that gambling town leave me alone." [Laughter]

There was another one about tornadoes and strong easterly winds in Georgia. He said, "Dear Governor, I have the answer to all of the tornadoes that we're having in Georgia. The answer is to go down there [the border] and put up a big fan that's four or five hundred feet high, powered by electricity and blow the tornadoes back to Texas." [Laughter]

But there were always some amusing incidents that happened to us, particularly in the mail. And I had a file at that time . . . that's what I was looking for . . . called the funny letter file. And they were all signed. There was another one that went something like this: "Dear Governor, I have just been released from Milledgeville State Hospital, and they told me the best thing for me to do was to get a job and get a girl." He said, "Governor, I got a job down here in Millen, Georgia, but my problem is I work at night and she works during the day and we can't seem to get together. So Governor, what should we do?" [Laughter]

I had asked all the ladies who sorted the mail to pull out the funny letters, and I kept about a dozen. They enjoyed those letters more than they did all the facts and figures I was

trying to get across. . . . [Laughter]

Henderson: Mr. Neal, let me conclude our interview by asking you one final question.

Neal: All right, sir.

Henderson: In Georgia history where is Ernie Vandiver's place?

Neal: Well, I think you know what my recommendation would be. From what I've said about Ernie, certainly in my lifetime, he, as I said earlier, he and Carl Sanders were both excellent governors, the two best governors in my lifetime, probably in history, with the possible exception of Ellis [Gibbs] Arnall, for what they did for the state. But Ernie and Carl will rank high in our state's history. I think people will come to appreciate both of them more as their administrations are viewed by historians. I think they will both rank in the top half dozen governors in the last hundred years. I cherish the friendship of Vandiver and Sanders as my personal friends. They always did the right thing! It was easy for me to work for them because I knew how they would react to certain things just by applying the "right thing" yardstick. And if I could come up with what I felt was the right thing, about ninety-nine times out of a hundred that's what they would do.

Henderson: I want to thank you for this interview. It has been most informative.

Thank you.

Neal: Thank you, sir.

End of Side Two

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