

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection
OH Vandiver 23
George Dekle Busbee Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson
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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Henderson: This is an interview with former Governor George D. [Dekle] Busbee in his law office in Atlanta. The date is March 17, 1994. I am Dr. Hal Henderson. Good afternoon, Governor Busbee.

Busbee: Good day.

Henderson: Thank you very much for granting me this interview.

Busbee: I'm delighted.

Henderson: You served in the state House of Representatives the last two years of the [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.] administration and you served all four years of [Samuel] Ernest Vandiver's [Jr.] administration. Let me begin by asking you: what was your impression of the Marvin Griffin administration?

Busbee: Well, of course, if you had to choose sides Marvin wouldn't have said that I was in his camp. I will say, however, that I was reminiscing with some people that served in the legislature with me back then and have served since I was governor, and we don't think it's as much fun as it used to be. I think he was a very colorful character and we had a great time, but I think that was former days for Georgia; that's not the era that we're in now.

Henderson: Okay. How would you describe the relationship between Lieutenant Governor Vandiver and Governor Marvin Griffin?

Busbee: Well, the first real bitter fight that I became engaged in as a legislator was during the time that I was there [and] Marvin Griffin was governor, and we had the rural roads fight. That was the issue that win or lose would bring Ernie Vandiver up or down because he laid it all on the table there, and that was a big issue, and it really was the first big legislature fight I was engaged in.

Henderson: What was that fight all about?

Busbee: Well, I don't know if it was all about rural roads. As I remember it, and it's a little vague now, but I think Marvin Griffin had proposed a hundred million dollar bond issue and Vandiver fifty. It was an up or down fight, no compromise; you go with Marvin or you go with Vandiver, and I voted with Vandiver. As a result of that I had opposition for the only time that I ever had opposition. [It] was at the end of Marvin's term; I had opposition. I never had it in the other eight terms that I served.

Henderson: Do you recall any of the lobbying activities by either Mr. Griffin or Mr. Vandiver on behalf of their particular point of view?

Busbee: Well, it was pretty intensive lobbying, I mean, real intensive lobbying. But really, as far as Vandiver, I committed to him early on, and I think Marvin knew it, and so I was really never pressured by Marvin Griffin.

Henderson: How active a role did you play in this fight?

Busbee: Well, later on I became a legislative leader, you know, the Democratic majority leader, and I was the governor's floor leader in [Carl Edward] Sanders' administration, but I was not really a legislative leader at that time. I was classed more of really an

independent; I was not really a member of either group. I sided with Vandiver and voted with him, and more or less aligned myself with him. But I was not a political power [laughter] then.

Henderson: In this fight in the '58 legislative session, why do you think the lieutenant governor was able to prevail?

Busbee: Well, really I can tell you very simply. Back then, I know this to be true, is that they thought he was going to win [the governorship] [laughter]. I mean, you try to play with the winner there, you know. I looked at Ernie Vandiver as being the new type of individual to lead the state that I thought would--we needed it and I really did it more for that than I did for a political purpose.

Henderson: In the 1958 primary Lieutenant Governor Vandiver wins an overwhelming victory. To what do you attribute that victory?

Busbee: The mood of the people for change. They were looking for, I think, a new face. I don't know that the people really knew Ernie Vandiver that much. I know when I ran for governor, I thought everybody would know my name. I'd been a majority leader; I'd been a leader in the legislature. I ran a poll when I first started running for governor and found out only 8 percent had ever heard my name, and they didn't know whether I was a Baptist preacher or a legislator. But in any event, I don't think people really knew Ernie that well. He had some good political alliances that were important more then than they are now, and I think he projected well.

Henderson: Did you play a role in his 1958 campaign for governor?

Busbee: Well, a minor role. I wouldn't say a major role, but I supported him, and I openly supported him, yes.

Henderson: In that election Lieutenant Governor Vandiver makes the "No, not one" statement. Did he discuss with you prior to making that statement whether he should make the statement?

Busbee: No. No, not once [laughter]. No, not once. He never discussed it, but, I'll tell you, I had many conferences at the governor's mansion. I suppose you might say I was one of the leaders then. After he was elected and when that statement came up to haunt him, I did meet periodically with him then concerning the statement and what was going on in the courts.

Henderson: At that time do you think that was a mistake that he made?

Busbee: Yes, it was a mistake, but I'll say this: it was not a mistake that--I mean, you look at George [Corley] Wallace [Sr.] in Alabama, I mean, the man was a part of the times; he was a part of the populace. It was the proper rule; that was an era that we have now long since buried, thank God. But I understand many of the people that were segregationists back then. I know when I really created the Sibley Commission, which I've never said openly because I committed not to. Griffin [Boyette] Bell was chief of staff, and he was for Ernie Vandiver, and it was really his idea, and it was the governor's thing, but I openly did it. But I knew at the time that they convinced me to do it, if we would were to put the issue to the people, at that time they would've closed the public school system. So I know that it was the wrong thing for Ernie to do, but I understand it as being a part of the time. Many people, many people that later became great leaders of our state, including Vandiver, had made similar statements, so I don't fault him for it.

Henderson: Now I understand prior to making the statement there was a division with his close advisors whether he should or should not. Are you familiar with that division at all?

Busbee: No, I was not a part of that.

Henderson: Do you play a role in the formulation or the drafting of any of the governor's legislative agenda?

Busbee: No, I was not one of his floor leaders. I was not really a leader in the legislature under Ernie Vandiver.

Henderson: Okay. One of the governor's bills was one entitled Honesty in Government. Do you recall that piece of legislation and why was it needed?

Busbee: God, I'll tell you [laughter], I think of every governor that I've ever served under, and I started with Marvin Griffin, has had some Honesty in Government [Bill] and people wanted honesty. Honestly I don't remember what the Honesty in Government Bill was that he had then. You might refresh my memory.

Henderson: Let me go on to another question. Could you describe for me the lobbying style of Ernest Vandiver as governor? How did he prevail upon lawmakers that they should get on his side?

Busbee: Well, I'll tell you, it was different when he was there than when I was there, and people that followed Lester [Garfield] Maddox because when the governor was really a powerful figure there with legislature prior to Lester Maddox. The reason being for Lester Maddox, of course, nobody got a majority of the vote [in the general election], that [election] went to the legislature. Ordinarily the legislature is elected and the governor is elected at the same time, and before the legislature can form, I mean, he controlled the legislature, but when Lester Maddox failed to get the majority vote in that run-off, we organized the legislature and took power of the governor away so. . . . Then [James Earl] Carter [Jr.] seized back a little and

I got it back a little more, but never like it was back in Carl Sanders', Ernie Vandiver, Marvin Griffin days, nothing as strong. So Ernie was a strong governor, being in the era that he was serving in as governor.

But as far as the style, it was pretty rough. You know, you'd be called down [laughter]: "If you want this road, you vote my way. If you want your constituencies to have something, you do this or you don't get it." I know I'd never been across the Mississippi River but once and that was to get married--went to Louisiana--and I had the opportunity to go to the [1960] Democratic Convention with Ernie Vandiver as governor, and the way it was presented to me: he called me down and said, "I appreciate what you've done in the past." He said, "You want to be a delegate at the Democratic Convention? If you vote for Lyndon [Baines] Johnson, you can go." So that's how strong he was. I mean, I told him I'd go, but I didn't have any choice who I was going to vote for when I got there. So it was pretty dictatorial then.

Henderson: Did he ever express any anger or displeasure at the lawmaker [who] voted against him or did something that he disagreed with?

Busbee: All governors did up until the time that I mentioned.

Henderson: Okay. Do you recall any . . . ?

Busbee: He never said anything to me. Of course, I voted against Vandiver after he was there on some issues. I was not really a Vandiver, as I said, a floor leader. I was not aligned with him in any way except that I'd supported him for governor, and I supported him in his fight with Marvin Griffin. But I really didn't have many dealings with him other than when he wanted my support he would call, and we would discuss it. He was very nice about it and understanding.

Henderson: Was his style of lobbying any different than, say, Marvin Griffin's or Carl Sanders'?

Busbee: Well, I would say that his was more like Carl's. Griffin, I mean, it was flat-out and, you know, you've heard about the smokehouse and [laughter] the George [Talmadge] Bagby story, but his [Griffin's] was flat-out threatening.

Henderson: During the 1960 Presidential campaign, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is arrested in Georgia, and Governor Vandiver plays a role in obtaining his release. Were you involved in this episode in any way?

Busbee: No, I lived in Albany at the time. I had nothing to do with it. The person that, I think, really saved Albany and really relieved Vandiver of much of his problems about that occurring in his state was Laurie Pritchett, the chief of police in Albany, because he gave Martin Luther King the key to his [cell] door, and the chief's office telephone, and left the cell unlocked. So I think that was very helpful to have someone like that for Ernie, and I think he did pretty well by that.

Henderson: Okay. There is some press speculation that President-elect John [Fitzgerald] Kennedy will nominate Vandiver to the position of secretary of the army. Now, Vandiver declines the position. Were you involved in this in any way?

Busbee: No.

Henderson: Okay. In the 1960 legislative session the Sibley Committee was created.

Busbee: This I remember well.

Henderson: I understand that you introduce legislation in the House to create the commission, or the committee. What was the purpose of the committee?

Busbee: Well, I don't think this has ever been in print, but I took an oath at the time that [laughter] I was approached with the idea that I would never tell it, but now that Griffin Bell has already told it in Washington to the press corps, I'll tell the whole story because that was my major contact and involvement with Ernie Vandiver. What happened is one weekend, during a break of the legislature for the weekend, I was approached by James [Harrison] Gray [Sr.], the editor and publisher of the *Albany Herald*, on behalf of Governor Vandiver. It was the idea of what was later known as the Sibley Commission. This was an idea conceived by Ernie Vandiver with Griffin Bell as chief of staff, and it was really a mechanism for a cooling off process of the people during a time that if they could've voted would've thrown out the public school system in the state.

Because at that time you had the tuition grants, you know, going in Virginia; you had the schoolhouse doors over in Alabama; and it was a lot, a lot of feeling all throughout Georgia. But the thinking was if you could have some way to delay, and have time for people to reflect on the needs for a public school system, that they would have cooler heads, and more reasonable heads, and they would have the logic to see that we had to save the public school system. So they had drawn this legislation, and when Jimmy Gray met with me after down in Albany that weekend I swore that I would--well at first I said that I would do it. I really didn't do that though for Vandiver so much. I wasn't obligated to him; I helped him, but really I felt very strongly that we should keep the public schools [open].

So the idea was that, the way the commission was being named, that we, while we didn't have a commitment on how everybody would vote, that we knew that if we could get Judge [John Adams] Sibley--a person could not have any more respect than Judge Sibley in the minds

of all Georgians--if we could just do that, and get a committee that we knew would not close the schools, and let everybody have a chance to talk, and be heard, and go all over the state with a tour that this process might work. So, anyway, the legislation was already drafted, and Gray handed it to me and released it to Charlie [Charles] Pou, the political editor for the *Journal*, as being something that I was going to do. Sunday morning when I woke up I had the biggest headlines about George Busbee I ever had, and it was supposed to be my bill and all this, and I was never to ever say the governor had anything to do with it because it might backfire. So anyway it did work and he, I think, did save the public school system through what the Sibley Commission did.

Henderson: Now, let me get this straight. Does the idea come from Ernest Vandiver or Judge Bell?

Busbee: Well, I'm not positive. I just remember that Jimmy Gray said something about that he had talked with Griffin [Bell] is who he'd talked to and that Griffin was the chief of staff, so you'll have to get that from them.

Henderson: Why were you picked?

Busbee: Because I was kind of the independent young turk. You know, I was the one of what they'd call the young turks. I voted with Vandiver sometimes, against him sometimes, and I would probably be more inclined to the public schools . . . and not be identified as being aligned with the governor in any way.

Henderson: What did the commission recommend? There was a majority report and a minority report.

Busbee: They recommended the schools, but really what happened, I think, was that the main thing was not the recommendation so much it was that we had gone through a period of months on a cooling off process where there was public support then for public schools. And a lot of the problems that were created in Virginia, Alabama, and other states in their effort to segregate, keep segregation--I think, reasonable heads prevailed in Georgia. That was the main part of it was public sentiment.

Henderson: At the time that you do this, introduce the legislation, do you see it possibly being detrimental to your political career?

Busbee: I really didn't think I had a political career because when I ran for the legislature it was a fluke. I never thought about being engaged in politics, and I was going to run and just stay two years, and I'd already been there six or eight. I never had opposition but one time, but I really didn't plan on a political future.

Henderson: Okay. In 1961 the state has to deal with the desegregation of the University of Georgia. How would you describe Ernest Vandiver's handling of that crisis?

Busbee: Well, of course, I didn't have a direct part in that. The only thing that I had a part in was as to whether we were going to close the schools, but I did meet in the governor's mansion along with some of his leadership periodically, several Sundays.

Henderson: Now was this pertaining to the Sibley Commission or the closing of the university?

Busbee: No, the closing of the university.

Henderson: Did he ever turn to you and say, "What should I do in this situation?"

Busbee: Well, he didn't turn that way. He had a circle of people in the room in chairs seated at the mansion and he turned to all of us and asked us. He asked advice.

Henderson: What did that group recommend to the governor?

Busbee: That the University of Georgia [laughter] not be closed.

Henderson: Okay. Was this a unanimous consensus of the group or was there some division?

Busbee: I would say that it was an overwhelming response. I can't say that it was unanimous, but I think that anyone that was opposed to it didn't have much to say. I don't remember it being bitter.

Henderson: Okay. Do you recall the people who were there, some of the people who were there?

Busbee: Yeah, but I couldn't recall more than 10 percent probably. I remember that I would be driven up by the state patrol along with Hawkham Perriol, an attorney that Vandiver highly respected, from Albany, and I remember Maddox Hale, and the speaker pro tem, and people like that being there, the speaker, and people like that.

Henderson: Was Carl Sanders present?

Busbee: I imagine that he was. He was in the Senate, but I don't recall him at that time.

Henderson: The governor addresses the legislature in a historic night session, January 1961, where he explains what he's going to recommend as far as the University of Georgia. Do you remember that session and the atmosphere?

Busbee: I really don't.

Henderson: Why do you think Ernest Vandiver, who campaigned "No, not one," who had the reputation of being a segregationist, decided to come out in favor of keeping the schools open?

Busbee: 'Cause he thought it was the right thing to do, and I think he'd realized that he'd been a part of the times and he needed to change with the times. He did do it and became a good leader, and I think he was respected for doing it by everyone whether they supported him or opposed him at the time. I think they all respected him for what he did.

Henderson: At that time do you think he was committing political suicide?

Busbee: Well, you know, that was one of these can't win situations maybe, but I really didn't know what the outcome would be with the Sibley Commission, and I didn't know what it would be with Vandiver then. I felt like right would prevail and it did.

Henderson: In the 1961 session there is a major fight between the governor and the legislature over budgetary matters. Do you remember that fight?

Busbee: I had eighteen sessions over there plus special sessions, but, no, I don't really know--over the budget, I mean. What was the issue and then I'll remember?

Henderson: The legislature was trying to have more control and influence over the budget, and there was a challenge coming from the legislature to do that. There's a big fight in legislature about it.

Busbee: I was probably involved against Vandiver on it because I fought for all this legislative independence, and I helped create all the legislative independence. Even in the Maddox administration we almost stripped the governor's power, and then I became governor

and tried to get a little of [laughter] it back. So, I really don't remember in answer to your question.

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

Busbee: Well, I think the major accomplishment would have to be in the education. I mean, what he went through, the trauma he went through in saving the public schools, the universities and all. That had to be his major accomplishment. I think that he tried to do a lot for the infrastructure, for the roads and things like that, and the education was of interest, but he was not able to--he didn't have the money to address educational needs so much because he was in a fight just to save education so much. That's what I remember him for.

Henderson: Okay. What do you think were some of the major shortcomings of the Vandiver administration?

Busbee: I don't really have anything particular to fault him for. I don't know that he had any particular shortcoming.

Henderson: How would you describe his stewardship as governor?

Busbee: Well, I think he was a leader. I think that he was an honest governor; I think that he faced some big issues. Even though, you know, it takes a pretty big man just to turn around after you've said something and do something different. I just think he was a strong governor.

Henderson: How would you describe his political philosophy: conservative, moderate?

Busbee: He was a moderate that tried to run as a conservative [laughter], and that's the way I would describe him. He wanted to get elected and he did.

Henderson: How would you describe his work habits as governor? Was he a workaholic, lackadaisical, somewhere in-between?

Busbee: I would say he'd be in-between. I mean, he enjoyed social settings, and I think that was important to have the leadership to engage in some of that. But I wouldn't describe him as being a workaholic, but at the same time I wouldn't describe him as being lazy.

Henderson: Okay. How would you categorize him? Was he a strong governor, a weak governor, somewhere in-between?

Busbee: I would say that he would be toward the strong, not the--I wouldn't say that he was weak in any way. I mean, we might've had some stronger people, but, one thing, in the time that he served he had a lot of powers, you know, just by having the governor's office, and I would say he was a strong leader.

Henderson: Did he have a laid-back style of dealing with people or was he more aggressive or kind of . . . ?

Busbee: He was very laid-back. I mean, you'd go in; the feet are on the desk; he'd never rush to the point. Plenty of time to talk to you. No, he was laid-back, I would say. He didn't jump in. Now, he had a temper on occasion. I've seen him mad, I mean, he had a temper, but he didn't display it very often. But when he did, there's was no question that's what it was, his temper.

Henderson: Now when he displays that temper, does he do it to the person he's mad with, or is he just blowing of steam in his office?

Busbee: Blowing off steam. I've been in his office when he's blowing off steam. Somebody's done something, and either they've told him they wouldn't do, or they lied to him,

and he'd be upset. I don't really remember any particular issue that he did this on. I just remember the occasions that he did it.

Henderson: He would not get on the phone and talk to this person . . . ?

Busbee: Oh, no. He didn't do that.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a politician?

Busbee: I would say he was an average politician, I think. I would say I was average and I think he was average. It was kind of hard to be a good one then because he was in changing times. I mean, the whole stage that you played on was being changed, so it was hard to be a good politician in that era.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a speaker?

Busbee: Average. [He] had a deep voice that I liked pretty well, but I would say he was an average speaker.

Henderson: Would he give extemporaneous speeches or did he have that script that he stuck with for the most part?

Busbee: Both. State of the state, things like that, of course, were written and read for posterity, but I heard many a stump speech he gave and it was pretty good.

Henderson: How would you compare his style out there on the stump, say, with a Marvin Griffin?

Busbee: Oh, that's no comparison. I mean, we haven't had one since Marvin [laughter], none of us.

Henderson: Or maybe a Carl Sanders?

Busbee: Well, Carl's--he's about like me or Ernie. Marvin was the last stump speaker we had.

Henderson: Okay. How would describe him as a political campaigner? Did he enjoy politics, being with people?

Busbee: He was a pretty good campaigner. I mean, he took it to heart, and I think he did a pretty hard job of campaigning.

Henderson: Okay. How would you describe his personality: someone fun to be around, someone who's very serious all the time?

Busbee: Someone's that very enjoyable to be around. He likes people, and you enjoy being with him, and he's not always off on the deep issue. He just enjoys being with people and I enjoyed being with him. I particularly enjoyed the social settings.

Henderson: Some of his friends and his critics have said there were two traits of his personality: he tended to be very frugal, and he tended to be, on occasion, stubborn. Did you ever see any demonstrations of either one of those traits?

Busbee: Well, I'd say--I wouldn't call him stubborn. I'd say he's strong-willed. It was kind of hard to make him change his mind, but I wouldn't say he was altogether stubborn. He wasn't wishy-washy, I'll say that.

Henderson: In 1966 he is the leading candidate in the governor's race but has to withdraw that year for health reasons. Were you supporting him prior to his withdrawal?

Busbee: Who all was running in that race?

Henderson: That's when Ellis [Gibbs] Arnall and Vandiver first started out, and then that's eventually [Howard Hollis "Bo"] Callaway gets in as a Republican and Lester Maddox

Busbee: No, I really didn't take any part in that race.

Henderson: Okay. In 1972 he runs for the U.S. Senate. Did you play a role in that campaign?

Busbee: No, I didn't have anything--I kind of withdrew altogether from any governor's races other than I supported Ernie the first time, I supported Carl, and that was about it.

Henderson: Why do you think he lost that race in '72?

Busbee: Well, I really can't answer the question. One thing, to be out and try and come back, it's hard to campaign as an underdog if you've already been governor, and we've had that demonstrated time and time again. I think that was against him. I didn't have a break, you know, between mine, my two terms. But I think that hurt him. He's not the underdog; he doesn't get the underdog support. He's got to defend his program. Another man can promise anything and say, "I would have done differently." But I can't answer that. [Cut off]

Henderson: Final question for you: What do you think is Ernest Vandiver's place in Georgia history?

Busbee: Well, you know, you classify governors, I think, as good governors or bad governors and maybe great governors, and I don't know that we've had any of those lately, but I'd say Ernie was a good governor. But what he'll be remembered for, I think, is this change in times, that he changed with the times. So he'll be remembered longer than most of us will be.

Henderson: Governor, thank you very much for this interview. It's been most informative.

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