

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection  
OH Vandiver 24  
DeNean Stafford, Jr. Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson  
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**EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON**

Side One

Henderson: This is an interview with Mr. DeNean Stafford, Jr., at his office in Tifton, Georgia. My name is Dr. Hal Henderson, and the date is January 15, 1994. Good afternoon, Mr. Stafford. I appreciate the opportunity to interview you.

Stafford: Yes, sir.

Henderson: How did you come to know Ernest Vandiver?

Stafford: Well, I met Ernest first when he was at school at Georgia [The University of Georgia]. I knew him just like many other students there, we weren't particularly close friends.

Henderson: Did you have any idea then, while he was at the University of Georgia and you were at the University of Georgia, that he had higher political aspirations?

Stafford: Yes. As a matter of fact, I was pretty sure he'd run for governor. I was president of the Interfraternity Council, and Herman [Eugene] Talmadge followed me, and Ernest followed Herman, I believe.

Henderson: You say you and he were not real close friends while at the University of Georgia?

Stafford: No.

Henderson: Did you play a role in his 1954 campaign for the lieutenant governorship?

Stafford: Yes, I helped him. . . politically.

Henderson: What was the extent of help?

Stafford: Well, he didn't need too much. He was in pretty good shape, and I helped him in this county [Tift].

Henderson: Why do you think he was so successful in that '54 race? Was he the stronger candidate? Did he have some weak opposition?

Stafford: Actually, I don't remember. I know the Talmadge group was very powerful at the time, and he was part of that.

Henderson: To your knowledge, did Governor Herman Talmadge play a role either directly or indirectly in his campaign?

Stafford: Well, I think his. . . . It was very important that he be for Ernest. Of course, his friendship for Ernest went further than just the two. I think Mr. Gene [Eugene] Talmadge was very close to. . . a very good friend of Ernest's father.

Henderson: You served in the state Senate the last two years of the [Samuel Marvin] Griffin [Sr.] administration. How would you describe the relationship between Governor Marvin Griffin and Lieutenant Governor Ernest Vandiver? Was it cordial or was it adversarial?

Stafford: I think it was cordial as that can be. Of course, when somebody is sitting right there looking for your job, why. . . . But I've never seen Governor Griffin when he wasn't cordial [laughter].

Henderson: During the Griffin administration there was a study program, or a study of state programs commission created. You served as the commission's executive secretary, and Governor Griffin and Lieutenant Governor Vandiver served on that commission. What was that commission all about?

Stafford: I served on two. I forget which one is which. One was a tax committee--I believe both of them were tax committees, were they not?

Henderson: I believe this was a state program study commission.

Stafford: [Long pause] I really don't remember. It seems to me like it had to do with raising taxes.

Henderson: Let me ask you [about] another committee that you served on. There was a States' Rights Council, and you served as its vice-president. What was this organization all about?

Stafford: That was an organization to. . . . Originally, it was. . . . We saw that integration was coming, and it was to make it as peaceable as possible. That was the original reason for it. Other states were having a lot of trouble, and we felt that anything we could do to help that [desegregation] would be advantageous. Later on, the States' Rights Council became a rather rabid anti-integration society. It was probably carried too far. Roy [Vincent] Harris, who I think a lot of-- I like him, but I think he used it as one of his springboards to further his own political ambitions.

Henderson: Do you recall Lieutenant Governor Vandiver playing a major role in that council?

Stafford: I don't know that he did anything really for the council. Bill [William Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.] was the secretary and did most of the work of the council. But it ceased to be of any influence, I think.

Henderson: You served in the state Senate in the last two years of Lieutenant Governor Vandiver's tenure as presiding officer of the Senate. How would you describe Lieutenant Governor Vandiver as the Senate's presiding officer?

Stafford: He did a good job. He handled it in a dignified manner. [He was] very friendly to all the other senators, and I thought he did rather well.

Henderson: He is relatively young to be in that position. Was that a detriment to him?

Stafford: I think not. That would have been beneficial to him. His wife was a very lovely girl. She was Dick [Richard Brevard] Russell's [Jr.] niece. Let's see. . . she was Dick Russell's uncle--I mean Dick Russell was her uncle.

Henderson: Right. Let me ask you about one of the major fights between Governor Griffin and Lieutenant Governor Vandiver, and that's over the rural roads program in the 1958 session. Do you recall that fight?

Stafford: Uh. . . . I didn't know that it was such a bad fight. I remember that that was one of Marvin's. . . . He wanted to pave all the rural roads in Georgia, and he approached it on a rather good basis, I thought at the time. It was not costing an awful lot of money, and it paved an awful lot of roads. [Laughter]

Henderson: Which side did you take in this fight in the '58 legislative session? Were you with the governor or were you with the lieutenant governor?

Stafford: I never took sides at all. I liked the governor fine. I considered him a good friend of mine. I roomed with. . . . Marvin and I had rooms at the same place.

Henderson: Now, where was that?

Stafford: In Atlanta.

Henderson: Uh-huh. Was that at the Henry Grady?

Stafford: Well, we had a room out at a home on Peachtree, so he could get away from the Henry Grady. I was rooming--I say, I wasn't rooming with him. I had my own room, but we were all in the upstairs of a large home out on Peachtree. Having lost a daughter in the [unintelligible] fire, that was something I won't forget [laughter].

Henderson: Yes. How would you describe Marvin Griffin as a person?

Stafford: A delightful fellow. I've never seen anybody that you could be around five minutes and feel like you've known him all your life except Marvin. He was very thoughtful, a very kind person. He was. . . probably too loyal to his friends, and they took advantage of that. I don't think he was a malignant person at all, actually not as much as the average politician-- maybe not enough [laughter].

Henderson: I understand that he was one of the great storytellers in Georgia politics.

Stafford: Oh, tremendous. I loved to hear Marvin tell his stories, particularly about the war [World War II].

Henderson: And he was a great campaign speaker.

Stafford: Very good.

Henderson: How would you describe his campaign speeches?

Stafford: Well. . . he presented his subject real well, but he wasn't as dogmatic as the average politician at that time.

Henderson: Let me go back to the fight in the 1958 legislative session. Do you recall any lobbying taking place on the senators and the representatives by either the governor or the lieutenant governor?

Stafford: I don't recall anything, any special lobbying. I know there were about four, four or five, paid lobbyists at the time. I understand there's four hundred now. Of course, we didn't get much--we didn't have an office, and we didn't have a desk. I think the whole session I drew . . . including trips to and from, I don't think it was around but twelve hundred dollars. I think they make . . . what? Ten thousand dollars a year?

Henderson: I think so. Let me go back to the Griffin administration. You have alluded to this. Some critics have called it the most corrupt administration in Georgia history. Do you think that's a fair assessment of the Griffin administration?

Stafford: No, not at all. I'd say that there were some corrupt people that attached themselves to it, but I don't think Marvin was corrupt. I think he was a little careless.

Henderson: Would you say the same thing about his brother Cheney [Robert Alwyn] Griffin?

Stafford: Well, I think Cheney was a little more inclined to look on the practical side of things than Marvin. Although I do remember one instance that might be of some interest to you. They were locating the state's farmers' market in Atlanta, and it was going to be quite an elaborate, expensive installation. The papers were very anti-Griffin, and, of course, Cheney was one of their favorite subjects. I remember I was standing there listening to them one time, and they approached him on it, wanted to know what he knew about the location of it. He said, well, he knew a lot about it, since he'd just bought a large tract of land, and it was going on that property right away [laughter]. Well now, Cheney didn't have any idea of having any property on it, but he kidded a lot, and it was a pretty good joke to see them writing down that in their books, [laughter] three of them. I think what went on mostly was petty sort of things that didn't

amount to much money. There was a big scandal about some state-bought, a few rowboats up on some lake. They made a big to-do about that.

Henderson: Do you play a role in Governor Vandiver's campaign for the governorship in 1958?

Stafford: I supported him, and I don't. . . . I was Herman's campaign manager in this county and so was with Marvin also. . . .

Henderson: In the 1958 campaign for governor William T. Bodenhamer runs against Vandiver. You and Bodenhamer are both residents of Tift County. How well did you know Bill Bodenhamer?

Stafford: Real well.

Henderson: What kind of person was he?

Stafford: Bill was a good, hardworking preacher. He was a Baptist preacher. He made a pretty good. . . representative. I think probably when he. . . . I helped him some get that position he had as secretary of the States' Rights Council, and I think he probably went a little too far with that. He didn't do too well in the election.

Henderson: Why do you think he ran against Ernest Vandiver?

Stafford: I don't know. He came to see me before he decided to run; he came to see me to discuss it, and he told me that, well, he'd decided to run. I said, "Bill," I said, "There's no way in the world you can get elected lieutenant governor." [Laughter] He says, "I didn't say lieutenant governor. I mean governor." [Laughter] I think the states' rights people, some of those people, were right enthusiastic about their cause, and I think they probably talked him into it.

Henderson: Do you think Governor Griffin had any influence on him running?

Stafford: No, no. I'm pretty sure he had nothing [to do with it]. I'm sure he patted him on his back, and told him he'd help him all he could, or something like that, but I doubt if he. . . . He had no interest in . . . because, I mean, Bill didn't really have a chance, not even close.

Henderson: During that campaign Ernest Vandiver makes the famous "No, not one" statement. Why do you think he made that statement?

Stafford: I think he was forced to, to keep his crowd that supported him together. I think it was--you have to. . . remember--when was that, thirty years ago? It was a lot different atmosphere then than it is now, and people were right to. . . . I think that it was. . . . Of course, not only did he make it, but anybody that had been governor--the last three or four governors had made the same statement. But I think it was pretty well required to get elected at the time. I think later on that Ernie probably helped the thing [desegregation] get on as amicable as possible later on, but I think he surely saw what was coming, so he accepted it.

Henderson: I understand you were a delegate to the 1960 Democratic National Convention. How did you become a delegate?

Stafford: I was a member of the state Democratic executive committee for some time, several years. Back when Herman was governor I was on the Democratic committee, and Marvin put me on that one. It wasn't just because they had the convention that year. Why, [laughter] I was just on the committee, the Democratic committee, anyway.

Henderson: So you were automatically a delegate because of your position?

Stafford: Well, I don't say it was absolutely necessary. The governor didn't have to appoint me, but he was the complete boss [unintelligible].

Henderson: When he asks you to be a delegate, does . . . ?

Stafford: Well, see, Ernie was--wasn't Ernie in there?

Henderson: Right. When he asks you to be a delegate, does he say: "When you go to the convention, you need to support such-and-such a candidate?" Or were you a free person, you could support anybody you wanted to?

Stafford: Well, he certainly didn't tell me who to support, but I knew I would support whoever the delegation was in favor of. I wouldn't make up my own mind arbitrarily [laughter].

Henderson: Who was the delegation's candidate?

Stafford: It was in favor of [Lyndon Baines] Johnson to start with. I think eventually they got around to [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy. So you see we didn't have much choice [laughter]. Both of them turned out to be less than what we hoped for.

Henderson: Did you play any role in getting President Kennedy elected in Georgia or at least carrying the state?

Stafford: No, I don't think I--'course, I was for him and supported the party. I'm sure I did what they asked me to, but back then, if you were a Democrat, there wasn't much question about it anyway.

Henderson: Let me ask you to give your impression of the Sibley committee. Were you in support of the Sibley committee's recommendation that the schools remain open even if they were desegregated?

Stafford: Was I in favor of it?

Henderson: Yes, sir.

Stafford: I don't know. I'm glad I didn't have that decision to make either [laughter].

Henderson: Let's talk about the desegregation of the University of Georgia. This takes place during Governor Vandiver's administration, and he has to make a decision as to whether he would close the university or keep it open and be desegregated. How do you think he handled that crisis?

Stafford: Well, he just had to go back on his campaign promises, but that is not necessarily [laughter]. . . . It certainly had happened many times before.

Henderson: Why do you think he went back on it? Now, here he is, someone who's a segregationist; he's associated with Senator Russell, Senator Talmadge, both segregationists.

Stafford: Well, he knew he could put up a battle. He could stay in court with it. It'd be popular locally, but he knew it wouldn't work. He knew desegregation was coming. The federal government had already--we were certainly a minority, and the time had come that it couldn't be delayed any longer.

Henderson: How did that decision of his play down in south Georgia--down here in Tifton? I mean, was it well received by citizens of Tift County, or did he receive a great deal of criticism?

Stafford: I don't think--now, there's some, several or a good many people felt that they were very sorry to see it happen. I don't think anybody blamed him because he was doing the best he could.

Henderson: Did you ever have an opportunity to discuss this with Senator Talmadge, about what Governor Vandiver did?

Stafford: No, [laughter] I don't remember it. It would've been useless because I know what he'd say.

Henderson: Okay. What was your impression of Ernest Vandiver as a governor. Do you think he was a capable governor, average governor?

Stafford: I thought he was average. I thought he did all right, and I don't necessarily think that the best governor is the one that does the most because frequently [laughter] that can become right trying too, you know.

Henderson: What was your impression of him as a speaker? Was he a dynamic speaker?

Stafford: No, he was nothing like Herman or Marvin. He wasn't any spellbinder, but he was convincing; he was adequate.

Henderson: How about Ernest Vandiver as a person? Is he the type of person you like to be around? Is he impressive, an average person? How would you describe him as a person?

Stafford: Well, I think he's very impressive to be around if you enjoy his company. He doesn't put himself forward. He's probably less than the average politician. He'll take the backseat. I mean, he won't put himself forward necessarily, but so was Jack Kennedy, the same way. [Laughter] He'd stand around like he wasn't anybody [laughter].

Henderson: Would you describe his personality as extroverted, introverted, somewhere in-between?

Stafford: I would say he was extroverted to a degree, but not to what Georgia was used to in politicians, let's put it that way. I think he's got good character, got a good wife; they were apparently very happy.

Henderson: It's been said that Governor Vandiver was a frugal man. Did you ever have any indication of this?

Stafford: I haven't seen one that wasn't, a governor that wasn't. Herman was as tight as he could be [laughter].

Henderson: It's also been said that Governor Vandiver had a streak of stubbornness in him. Did you ever come across that?

Stafford: Yeah, he was a little butt headed now and then.

Henderson: Did you ever see him get mad with a senator or anybody in government about anything, or was he basically calm and cool at all times?

Stafford: Mostly calm and cool. I enjoyed his [legislative] session[s] very much. I'm glad I went up there for one term. It's an awful lot of sugar for a nickel though [laughter] back then, I'll tell you right now. Herman had a way of putting me on committees that didn't pay anything, but yet they had a lot of work. So I was [laughter]--my public service was. . . .

Henderson: Now, your friendship with Herman Talmadge, how far does it go back?

Stafford: It goes back to freshman year at Georgia [The University of Georgia].

Henderson: And since then you and he have remained good, close friends?

Stafford: Yeah, I hear from him now and then, and I call him twice a year.

Henderson: Going back to Ernest Vandiver, just as an interesting citizen, do you see any major accomplishments of the Vandiver administration?

Stafford: Well, damn, that's so long ago I forget what he did [laughter], if anything. 'Course, certainly his administration was overshadowed by the integration thing. Nobody in the public was very uninterested about that. Herman held office right before him and pretty well got the thing organized. [Editor's Note: Marvin Griffin followed Herman Talmadge's administration.] The state was in good shape financially. He had the guts enough to put the state a sales tax, and

he exempted nothing [laughter], so he didn't have any argument about what was in there 'cause everything was, caskets and Bibles and everything else [laughter]. Since then that's been eroded to a degree.

Henderson: When historians write about Georgia history, how do you think they're going to write about Ernest Vandiver? Is he going to be looked upon as an average governor, below average, above average governor?

Stafford: I'll think he'll be looked on as a . . . and it would probably be noted that he was a good friend of Herman's. Plus his uncle, Dick Russell, had considerable influence over him. I think that it was a highly controversial era, and he handled it probably as well he or anybody else could handle it. I know he's lain awake plenty of nights worrying about it. Unfortunately I don't think it's accomplished a whole lot. I mean, I don't see that anybody's a whole lot better off than they were before. You might feel better about it. It certainly got us a trillion dollars in debt one way or another, and for--[laughter] this is an aside--but for the first time I've heard it mentioned that Washington, that they're waiting until they can inflate the currency to such a point that the debt will be wiped out. [Laughter] So that's what I've been looking for now for several--not one year, but about ten, fifteen years.

Henderson: Is there anything that I should have asked you about Ernest Vandiver that I failed to do so and you'd like to . . . ?

Stafford: No, I don't know anything about him that I told you [unintelligible]. He's not a--well, he was in a controversial age and he was there; it wasn't his fault. He didn't create the situation. Herman did more to probably create it than Gene. In Georgia they did, but if they weren't doing it, somebody else would have, so. . . .

Henderson: Well, Mr. Stafford, I want to thank you for granting me this interview. It's been interesting.

Stafford: Well, I'm delighted to do it. I'm sorry that I can't--I don't know more about him. I give his wife a lot of credit. She was a delightful person.

Henderson: Well, thank you very much.

Stafford: Yes, sir. [Cut off]

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