

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection
OH Vandiver 26B
William Lanier Interviewed By Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson (Part B)
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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Lanier: You know, the segregation laws always bothered me somewhat, and I don't pose as an attorney. I just suppose as a one-gallous farm boy. But the reason--you know, our segregation law says blacks, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, or any other Asiatic blood . . .but you could put a cape around your shoulder and a towel on your head and get in any university in the state of Georgia and pose as a foreigner and there was no objection. But when this thing finally came down, it only mentioned, as I recall it, Afro-Americans.

Henderson: What would you consider some of the major failures of the Vandiver administration?

Lanier: I guess on things like the county unit system and on desegregation--'course, this may be hindsight, now--that if I had been his chief advisor, I would've put him on the stump all over the state of Georgia, and explained my real philosophy, and what the powers-that-be were going to accomplish come hell or high water without it, and that I'm going to do thus and so because of my love and concern about the state of Georgia now and in future years. Communications.

Henderson: How would you describe his stewardship as governor?

Lanier: Good, good.

Henderson: How would you describe his political philosophy?

Lanier: Sound.

Henderson: Conservative, moderate, or liberal?

Lanier: Conservative. [Laughter] He doesn't know what liberal means [laughter]. All he knows about liberalism is that he's against it.

Henderson: Would his philosophy be very similar to Herman [Eugene] Talmadge's?

Lanier: Yes. It would be similar to Talmadge's and [Richard Brevard] Russell's [Jr.]. The major difference between the Talmadge and Russell philosophy: old Gene [Talmadge] made segregation more of an issue than the Russells ever did. The Russells were segregationists, but Gene made it more of a division between their two philosophies. But basically Talmadge and Russell--well, you take in the United States Senate. I've heard Dick Russell say that he and Herman hardly ever conferred, and I've heard Herman say the same thing, but 99 percent of the time they'd vote alike. It was a natural thing, and Ernie Vandiver fit in that pattern.

Henderson: Some people consider Ernie Vandiver stubborn and frugal. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

Lanier: I think there's enough evidence for conviction [laughter].

Henderson: Would you consider him a strong, a weak governor, or somewhere in-between?

Lanier: I think he was a strong governor. Now, keep this in mind: you've got to use the criteria that's at hand, and when he came into office it was not a bed of roses from what people thought of government, our finances, and you cannot judge everyone by the same criteria because they don't . . . none come into office with the same criteria, same atmosphere, same problems. So judging from what he was subjected to when he came in, I'd have to give him a good rating.

Henderson: How would you describe his style of dealing with people?

Lanier: Well, I've known greater people persons than Ernie. I think with the moderate to intelligent people that he could handle that better than he could some person on the lower scale.

Henderson: Would you consider him a backslapper, storyteller kind of person?

Lanier: No, sir.

Henderson: If he walks into a room with other politicians, how would he deal with those people?

Lanier: How would he what?

Henderson: Deal with those people.

Lanier: Satisfactorily. He had a good handshake; he had a good manner. Little more aristocratic than the average public office seeker, but he was not the backslapper and storyteller, say of [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.].

Henderson: How would you describe him as a politician?

Lanier: Good, but not as outgoing as Senator Russell, Talmadge, or Marvin Griffin. But he was a good politician.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a speaker?

Lanier: Good. He was a forceful speaker.

Henderson: How would you compare his speaking style with, say, Eugene Talmadge?

Lanier: Well, it's hard to compare it because Gene lent to--he had more emotionalism in his to get your attention, and then he fed what you wanted after he had baited you into an emotional thing. Ernie . . . no, he didn't use emotionalism much, very little. But Gene had a terrific skill. He could use a certain subject that he knew just about everybody in that audience was for, and then he'd feed them some good stuff, see.

Henderson: How would you compare his speaking style with, say, Marvin Griffin's?

Lanier: Marvin Griffin and Ed [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers were just Whether you liked them or not, you'd have to put them as the better speakers.

Henderson: How about his style of speaking as compared to Herman Talmadge's?

Lanier: I'd rate Herman a little better.

Henderson: How 'bout Ellis [Gibbs] Arnall's?

Lanier: Hmmm. Some speeches Ellis turned me on and some he'd turn me off. I would say that Ernie was more stable in keeping his audience than he would be, say, hot one day and cold one day. But Ellis Arnall, in his day he was pretty good. In fact, he was good.

Henderson: How would you describe Ernie Vandiver's personality? Introverted? Extroverted?

Lanier: In-between. He was certainly not an extrovert, and I don't think you could call him an introvert. So in-between, that's the best way. Now, his wife Betty [Sybil Elizabeth Russell Vandiver] was more outgoing. I think they complimented each other.

Henderson: How so?

Lanier: Well, you got a room full of people in here, and some of them go for extroverts and some moderates or introverts, and they appealed to somebody in one way or another, just about everybody in the room. 'Cause she's a mixer; she's a Russell.

Henderson: In 1966 Governor Vandiver considers running for governor again, and he has to drop out of that race. Prior to dropping out of that race, were you supporting him for the office?

Lanier: Yes, sir.

Henderson: How were you supporting him?

Lanier: Well, I was president of the Farm Bureau in Georgia, and Phil [James Philander] Campbell [Jr.] and I were scheduled to meet in Atlanta--I believe it was at the Dinkler Hotel--with Richard Ashworth to write his farm platform. As I was walking out of my office in Macon, Georgia, as president of the Farm Bureau, the phone rang. Normally when I got that far I wouldn't take calls but I did that one. It was Richard Ashworth. He said, "Don't come to Atlanta. I'll be in touch with you later." Well, the later was because he [Vandiver] had withdrawn because his doctor had told him, if he wanted to leave a widow and some orphans, to stay in the race, and if he didn't to get out. But Richard Ashworth and Phil Campbell and I were to write the farm platform and make suggestions on other planks in his platform.

Henderson: Do you think if he had been able to stay in that race [that] he could have been reelected?

Lanier: Absolutely. I think the thing that got him in the Senate race as much as anything--was it fourteen years from he'd been in office 'til he ran for the Senate? You know, Gene Talmadge, any damn body that ran, he'd run against them. He wasn't going to let his following, his nucleus, you know, get away from him. He'd run against George; he ran against Russell, you know, in-between governor's races. Ernie was out, say, fourteen years. That is difficult to overcome, very difficult. Yes, I think if he had stayed in the governor's race--see, all them that got in it wouldn't have gotten in it because I think it was a closed case almost.

Henderson: Now you have alluded to this: there is a break in relations between Carl [Edward] Sanders and Ernest Vandiver over Carl Sanders's possible running for the Senate against Russell. Do you want to discuss that any further?

Lanier: Uh, well, that's really basically all there is to it because he wanted to--see, he helped Carl in his first race, and Ernie thinks that he set the stage to call Carl--see, Carl was not a household word, see. He was known in Atlanta in the political circles but he was not known over the state. So Ernie thought he set the stage for him, and then when he wanted to run against Uncle Dick, then he helped Jimmy [James Earl] Carter [Jr.] beat Carl, and then when Jimmy Carter reneged, then he and Carl became friends again. The last accounts I had, they still enjoyed a good friendship.

Henderson: Why do you think Jimmy Carter reneged?

Lanier: You know, I've often wondered about that. Now, David [Henry] Gambrell is a nice fellow. His daddy had been president of the American Bar Association; his wife comes from Swainsboro, Georgia, from a very prosperous, well-known, wealthy family. At the time he [Carter] appointed Mr. Gambrell--and I liked Gambrell--I wondered if Jimmy then wasn't appointing a seat-warmer and he would run himself. Now, that's my--nobody else has ever suggested that to me--that's my evaluation. What other reason would he have picked Mr. Gambrell, an unknown? So I wondered if he didn't want to go up to the Senate himself. He knew that he couldn't beat Talmadge for the Senate. That's my opinion. He was picking somebody he knew that would step down if he wanted to run. [Cut off]

Henderson: Mr. Lanier, let me ask you one final question: What do you think will be Ernest Vandiver's place in Georgia history?

Lanier: It depends on the journalist. I have seen some people that did a mediocre job but had favorable press. I've seen some people do a better job and have a press that's not favorable, and the man with the less impressive thing would come out on top. I personally feel that if the

writers of books and the journalists, authors, will evaluate Georgia as it was January 1 of 1959 until he went out of office, I think he is going to go out as a good governor, constructive. I think his greatest handicap will be he's not as flamboyant as some people were, and people that are less flamboyant sometimes get left on the sidelines. They don't get in to score the touchdown. They're on the bench, but I do believe if historians and authors, journalists, are fair and reasonable with the man, that he will go down in history as a good governor and one that had enough male hormones to do what was right in crisis.

Henderson: Mr. Lanier, I want to thank you for granting me this interview. It's been most informative.

Lanier: I was flattered that you would even think of me to participate in it, and I appreciate you coming, and Jean [Lanier] and I have enjoyed having you in our home.

Henderson: Thank you very much. [Cut off]

End of Side One

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