

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project
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Governor James Earl Carter interviewed by Hugh Cates
February 22, 1971

CATES: This is February 22, Hugh Cates. I'm in the office of Governor Jimmy Carter talking to him about his relationship with Senator Richard Russell. What was the earliest association you had with Senator Russell, Governor Carter?

CARTER: Well, the earliest memory I have of Senator Russell was when he ran for United States Senate against Mr. Charles Crisp who was a very fine political leader from my own home county of Sumter. Mr. Crisp was Speaker of the House of Representatives. And when I was just a child, a tiny child, I went to a political rally of Mr. Crisp's and, of course, heard about Senator Russell who later defeated him very easily. My father was a great admirer of Senator Russell and a strong supporter of his. I went to the United States Naval Academy and while I was a midshipman there, I visited Senator Russell several times in Washington on days that I could get off from Annapolis. Senator Russell always received me very graciously and because I was a military officer, he was quite interested in me at the time he was Chairman of the Armed Services Committee or a senior member of it. Mr. Carl Vinson was the Chairman of the same committee in the House. So I had very strong support there as a young midshipman

Later on, I worked for Admiral (Hyman George) Rickover in the Atomic Energy Commission and Senator Russell at that time again was quite interested in my own career. When Admiral Rickover was about ready to be discharged from the Navy because of some technicality in the promotion law, although he was probably the most valuable scientist and officer to the Navy of all, I was one of the two officers assigned to the second atomic submarine program the USS Sea Wolf up in Schenectady, New York. I talked to Senator Russell about this several times. He was a close friend and admirer of Admiral Rickover; and he, Congressman Vinson, and Harry Truman, who was then President, were instrumental in changing the law so that Admiral Rickover could stay in the Navy with a special dispensation of Congress. But my father died in 1953, fall. He was a member of the Legislature at the time. I went to see Senator Russell about the possibility of my resigning from the Navy. I had the best job in the Navy, but after discussing it with Senator Russell he recommended that I--that I do resign and that he would help me to convince Admiral Rickover that I should be released, which he did. This was a great turning point in my life, and I returned to my own hometown and served subsequently in the Legislature, on the School Board, and then ran for Congress and ultimately for Governor twice and was elected this time. But I never did have any major decision on my own life made concerning politics that I didn't first discuss it with Senator Russell. He was a close advisor of mine. I think he liked me. I had a great admiration for him, and as I say my memory of him goes back to I would say to when I was eight or ten years old.

CATES: Governor, when you discussed with Senator Russell your resignation from the Navy did you discuss the political aspect of your future?

CARTER: Well, I told him that I could see what my father's life meant to Georgia, although my daddy was just a farmer, which I am too. And I recognized and told Senator Russell that my father served the community and I thought, even though I had a good job in the Navy, that public service in Georgia and politics might be just as effective a way to spend a life as to serve the peacetime Navy. He agreed, and later on because of his influence I was able to get out.

CATES: It was a practice of Senator Russell never to endorse anyone in a political race in Georgia, but yet he endorsed you Friday, the November 3, 1970, general election. Why do you think he did this?

CARTER: Well, I--first of all, I think this is a great compliment to me and a great honor for me because as Senator Russell told me the last time I had a long talk with him he had made a standard practice for the last 40 years of not interfering in statewide or local elections in Georgia. I was frankly surprised that he endorsed me publicly and...very grateful for him. I honestly think that Senator Russell thought a great deal of me, and I would like to think that that is the only reason he did it. I don't know of any other reason except I did confide in him. I talked to him intimately. I described to him my own political aspirations, and have for years, and I think he had just a personal interest in me as a candidate.

CATES: Was Hal Suit's constant favorable reference to Senator Russell in his campaign speeches a factor in Russell's decision to endorse you, a Democrat nominee?

CARTER: I think it may have been because Suit inferred to the Georgia people, incorrectly, that he had Senator Russell's support, and I think Senator Russell wanted to be sure that the Georgia people knew that, between me and Mr. Suit, that I was his choice.

CATES: Governor, you mentioned the positive influence that Senator Russell had on you entering Georgia politics. Would you please comment about your Republican opponent's decision to enter politics? Do you feel he was influenced indirectly by Senator Russell since Hal Suit had interviewed Russell and narrated the TV documentary "Russell Georgia Giant"?

CARTER: Well, I'm not sure that I have a completely objective viewpoint concerning this. What I really believe and I hope I'm doing justice to Mr. Suit, is that he first decided to run for the governorship of Georgia about a year ago which he said frequently. And then he went to Washington to interview Senator Russell and to prepare a three-hour documentary film to be shown on WSB television. This may or may not be fair to him. I made this statement in just an offhand way during the campaign, and Mr. Suit never did deny it but it's no question that he used his relationship with Senator Russell in the long and highly publicized documentary film to promote his own political campaign. I don't see anything particularly wrong about this. I'm not criticizing Mr. Suit for having done it, but I think he certainly did decide to run for the governorship prior to his interviews with Senator Russell.

CATES: I see. Much has been said in the press about you--your supposedly promising Senator Russell's nephew-in-law Ernest Vandiver the Senator's seat if it ever became available. Would you comment about this please?

CARTER: Well, the fact is that I never talked to Senator Russell's nephew-in-law Ernest Vandiver about any appointment of him to the Senate prior to Senator Russell's death. I didn't make a commitment to anyone about what I would do if Senator Russell died. Whenever the subject came up my standard reply, both to those who were seeking the office and to newsmen and others, was that my own--my only consideration was a prayer that Senator Russell would stay in office and stay well throughout this term and perhaps the next one. I also went to Washington, by the way, to tell Senator Russell that if he decided to run in 1972 against anyone that he would have my qualified support, if he decided to do that. So I never made any commitment to Ernest Vandiver, nor to anyone else about appointment to succeed Senator Russell.

CATES: When was it that you went to the--to Washington to assure the Senator that he had your support in 1972?

CARTER: I would say a couple of years ago when he first became ill there was a move on the part of then Governor (Carl) Sanders to run against him, and then earlier this past year maybe two years ago, I tried to let Senator Russell know that he need have no fear--need have no fear of opposition if I became Governor because I would support him regardless of any opposition. I would guess about two years ago.

CATES: Would you please comment as to how you arrived at selecting Senator Russell's successor since his shoes were obviously so large to fill?

CARTER: Well, in the first place, I deliberately postponed making the decision until after the emotion related to Senator Russell's death had subsided in my own mind and in the minds of the Georgia people. Then I made a decision that I should choose his successor without any consideration, pro or con, of the kinship of the persons considered to Senator Russell himself. Then I made a very, I think, wise and overriding consid--decision to choose a person that I thought in Georgia was the best-qualified man to represent us in the United States Senate. There was no way to appoint someone who could fill Senator Russell's shoes. Senator Russell was a great statesman. He was much older than I or the new Senate appointee He had a lot more experience. He had become committed over a long period of times to stands on issues, which may or may not be germane in the modern time. And I thought about this, prayed about it, talked to a lot of people about it. The person that I choose, David Gambrell, is a fine young man of great courage and ability, one who never asked me for the appointment, by the way, and in him I have complete confidence. I think he'll do an able job of filling Senator Russell's position there without in any way trying to duplicate Senator Russell's attitudes or ideas. I think he will go a long way toward duplicating, however, Senator Russell's basic character traits of complete honesty integrity, ability to love for Georgia, and I think this is substantially what I sought for and I think I found what I was seeking in David Gambrell.

CATES: Did you have any difficulty in convincing him that he should accept this appointment?

CARTER: No, I announced the appointment on Monday. He was sworn in on Tuesday, and I never talked to David about it until Sunday night. And when I asked him I honestly had no way

to determine what his reply would be. He did reply that before he would accept or reject it, he wanted to talk to his wife. He talked it over with his wife, Luck, who is from Swainsboro, Georgia, and he and I discussed several critical issues concerning his own inclinations about his law practice and so forth. And then he said that he would take the appointment.

CATES: Another instance of Senator Russell's supporting someone politically in the last months of his life was his proxy vote given to Senator (Robert C.) Byrd of West Virginia. Would you comment about this, please?

CARTER: Well I, I didn't ever talk to Senator Russell about this particular vote. It came up after he became critically ill. He did feel that when Senator (Edward Moore) Kennedy first went-- came to the Senate he was a model junior Senator. He worked hard, he took care of his business, and he was very modest in his public appearances and in his attitudes toward the senior Senators. Later on, I think, when Senator Kennedy became so highly publicized, he was elected party whip to replace Senator Russell Long of Louisiana. Senator Russell personally favored the retention of Senator Long in that position at the time. And then I think Senator Kennedy departed from his, I think, almost obligatory role of a servant to the other senators, and became one who put a major portion of the work on Senator Byrd of West Virginia. Senator Russell felt this very strongly and voted for Senator Byrd because of this, and I think that he acted in the best way he thought that he should as a senior member of the Senate in appointing a man regardless of political philosophy who would best serve the other senators in this important and very low key position, that of a party whip.

CATES: You mention the word philosophy. How do you view your political philosophy with that of Senator Russell? Did you ever discuss this with the Senator?

CARTER: Yes, quite a lot. I think I'm basically the same as he. I look on Senator Russell as one of the finest examples of a Southern Populist who never feared government as such. He was committed to the fact that individual human beings have a right to be free, to be self-reliant; that government ought to be dominated by men, and never men dominated by government. He believed strongly in the autonomy of the states. He also was quite proud of the legitimate use of government to give poor and deprived people, regardless of race, an opportunity to become self-reliant, and to take their legitimate positions alongside the more fortunate citizens and enjoy privileges and prerogatives and duties and responsibilities of government. He looked on as his greatest achievement in the Senate as the school lunchroom program, which gave poor children a chance to eat a good meal everyday. And I think this is basically the way I feel, without hatred or without prejudice toward anyone. I believe in the freedom of the individuals at the local level of government to state level to make their own decisions. I think we ought to act responsibly. We ought to change when the times require it. We ought to strengthen the individual human being; use government in a legitimate way to bring out the natural talent with which God has blessed each one of us. And I think this is basically the way Senator Russell, and I might say Senator Walter F. George, also felt.

CATES: Do you think some of this philosophy stemmed from the time when he was Governor of Georgia during the Depression and he saw this need, this poverty?

CARTER: Yes, I think so. I don't think you've read a highly publicized statement of his, that in times of economic depression he was a liberal and in times of prosperity he was a conservative. I'm very conservative about my attitude toward economy, efficiency, and strength of local governments, individual autonomy, and so forth. I think this is a--a situation--an attitude which he certainly shared, and I think I got a lot of my own ideas from him.

CATES: Would you please comment about your plans for the reorganization of the state government and compare them with what Senator Russell did when he became governor?

CARTER: Well, I think in the large degree I'll use his goals as my own. He reduced the number of state departments from 140 down to about 40. Now we have 253. He acted in a very domineering way because the people had faith in him: he--the legislature was eager to do his will. He acted in a time of extreme economic emergency in the early part of the Depression. I have got more authority designated to me by the legislature through my own reorganizational bill. And this will give me, I think, an opportunity to pattern my own reorganization fairly much after his. The times are different. Its forty years later, but we have the same basic need to bring some order out of chaos, to reduce the number of state agencies, to institute businesslike principles of management within the state government, itself. This is where I'll produce what he did.

CATES: Did you ever discuss these points specifically with the Senator?

CARTER: No, I never did, except just in passing. I never did go into any detail with him about these particular points.

CATES: What is the most vivid impression you have of Senator Russell?

CARTER: Well, I think because it was my last long conversation with him it was during the campaign in the late summer on the front porch of his house in Winder when he encouraged me in my own political efforts. He said that as far as he knew every member of the Russell family was a friend of mine politically; that he wished me every success and that he would be there to help me when I needed it. He frequently gave me advice on whom to contact within the different communities of Georgia who might be politically helpful to me. In most instances, to be perfectly frank, they were about one generation older than the active political participants, but his benevolent attitude toward me, his earnest consideration of my own political efforts is my most vivid memory of the Senator.

CATES: What did you consider to be his most outstanding personality trait?

CARTER: Complete integrity.

CATES: What did he say to you after your November 3 general election victory?

CARTER: Well, he just called to tell me that he congratulated me, that he had a great deal of confidence in me, knew I was going to do a good job, and that he was there to help me when I needed him.

CATES: Were there any unusual experiences or episodes you have firsthand knowledge of pertaining to the Senator?

CARTER: No, there really aren't. The one that I described concerning Admiral Rickover was typical of him where he used a tremendous power and the prestige at his command to do something that would save the strength of our nation in a time of stress. I would say this was another less highly publicized action of his comparing favorably with--with his own leadership at the time of the General (Douglas) MacArthur discharge by Senator--by then President Truman. He investigated and gave the people of the country a confidence that--that General MacArthur should have been discharged, dismissed by President Truman. Later on he went to President Truman and had legislation passed to keep Admiral Rickover in the Navy. But in a time of crisis when the nation's defense was at stake he was always there.

CATES: Considering that your time is very limited, I would like to ask you this and we'll close the interview. Do you have any last words that you would like to pass on to future historians and researchers who will be studying the life and times of Richard Brevard Russell?

CARTER: Well, I think he accurately mirrored the feelings of the Georgia people, the Southern people, and to a great degree the American people in his major decisions, times change. His efforts to strengthen the autonomy and individuality and the rights of states was the one that he was most highly publicized about, as far as actions go. He never had any personal prejudice toward anyone, black or white citizens. Now that the time has come when our people, as he always encouraged us to do, have decided that we will obey the law, the law has been changed. I personally think that Senator Russell would under the circumstances existing now have taken basically the same attitude I have to tell the Georgia people, as I did in my own inaugural address, that the time for racial discrimination is over. He never discriminated against anyone, and he was in my mind the greatest statesman that Georgia has ever produced. And it was because of an innate goodness and an understanding, a love for Georgia, complete integrity and honesty, and a high degree of personal intelligence, which let him, order his own actions based on an accurate analysis of a current situation.

CATES: Think you very much, Governor Carter.