

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project
RBROH-108
Ivan Allen, Jr. interviewed by Hugh Cates
February 17, 1971

CATES: This is Hugh Cates. I'm in the office of former Atlanta mayor, Ivan Allen, and today is February 17, 1971. Mayor Allen, would you mind telling me how you first met the Senator or got to know him on a personal basis?

ALLEN: I would have a difficult time to recall my first meeting with Senator Russell. I probably knew him through my father's [Ivan Allen, Sr.] friendship with the Senator which began in the twenties when Dick Russell first came to Atlanta as a young legislator. My father's intimacy with him through the years began to develop at that time. My father had served in the state legislature in the late teens and was then still vitally interested in the affairs of the state. Governor [Lamartine Griffin] Hardman had appointed Daddy as head of a government reform commission which--and the commission included Hugh Peterson, Sr., and when Senator Russell was elected governor, he asked Hugh Peterson to head up a similar commission and they adopted the report that had been made by the commission that my father had headed up in 1929. And this, of course, was the first major accomplishment of Governor Russell in the short interim that he served as governor--and that was the reform and reorganization of the state government.

He and my father were extremely close friends. Daddy's later association with him through the years included several appointments which the Senator offered my father as head of the Federal Home Loan Bank in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a volunteer position--I mean, not a paid position, full time position, but as chairman of the board of that bank, an honorary position--and Daddy was closely associated with the Senator during the Senator's early years in Washington, D.C. It happened that Senator Russell and I were fraternity brothers in the SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon] fraternity and through the years as my opportunity to participate in both state and local affairs here began to develop, I had more and more opportunity to know him personally and to increase my high respect for his capabilities.

CATES: Mayor, do you have any personal story that you could recount concerning these fraternity encounters with the SAE fraternity?

ALLEN: Well, he was always, I would say, most patient and self-sacrificing in his relationship with old friends and old associations. On a number of occasions he would come to our annual parties; on several occasions he came out to our home where Mrs. [Louise Richardson] Allen and I have hosted a large party for the SAE fraternity in the fall of each year, and several occasions the Senator was kind enough, being in the state, to come to that party and participate in it. So, all of these things added up to a very close personal relationship.

CATES: I know you were too young, but did your father participate in any definite way in the governor's administration when he [Russell] was governor of Georgia for a short period?

ALLEN: I don't know of specific instances. Daddy was very active in many things and was part of the Russell support in the state, and I expect was a major participant in the Russell campaign of 1936, 1938--I think it was 1936 when the campaign was run. [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt, Russell, [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers was [sic] the three R's, and it--of course, I think Daddy was finance chairman for the whole campaign for the state at that time. I don't recall any specific instances of assignments that he had actually during the very short tenure that the Senator was governor of the state.

CATES: I believe you had mentioned before the interview started that your father had written a book about the reorganization of state government that Governor Russell did while he was in office. Would you mind recounting something from this book?

ALLEN: Well, perhaps it'd be best to relate what Daddy says about it in his book, and he says, "Hardman was succeeded by Richard B. Russell, Jr. Ordinarily the plan[s] to one administration are quickly filed in the trash basket by the succeeding one, but Allen's reorganization plan was so obviously good that it proved exception to this general rule. Shortly after his inauguration Russell wrote to Allen, 'Your label in the reorganization bill has sown the seed that I feel will enable us to accomplish this great reform. In Georgia, I shall devote every effort to securing the reorganization and simplification of our governmental machinery, and I agree with you that it is one of the most important things in the life of our state.' Governor Russell appointed a new commission headed by Mr. Hugh Peterson who had served on the first one. Some changes in detail of the proposal as originally submitted were made mainly in connection with the Board of Regents for the University system of Georgia, but the reorganization which took place during Russell's term in office was essentially that which the first commission had outlined."

So, I think, you can see that here was the work that went on over a number of years. Obviously, the Senator had participated in it indirectly through Mr. Peterson who was his relative and who understood state affairs and obviously the guiding hand of the Russell family--which, I think, is the great strength of that family. What they had contributed to the state over the years was instrumental in developing this reorganizational plan which was the last time that the state government was satisfactorily reorganized--so, that's some forty years ago.

CATES: Right.

ALLEN: I would like to comment on what I think is really the greatest contribution to the state that Senator Russell has made--and not in terms of any specific legislation or act while Senator or while serving at the national level. To me, the most remarkable thing about the Russell family is that through really inex--exceeding the lim--the span of two generations the family has contributed, both with the Senator's father and with himself and with some of his younger relatives who are coming along. You can say that the Russell family has given to the state great leadership of a high degree of intelligence and integrity over a longer span of time than any other family in the history of the state, and this requires a certain form of dedication that is rarely ever seen--where one family, both in the Senator's father who was active in the political affairs of the state and then became, I think, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and then Senator Russell starting in the middle twenties, perhaps as early as 1925, I guess, when he first came into the Legislature here and then on through the period, till the period of, till the time of his death--that

there has never been a record of another family contributing in an intelligent and dignified way consistent leadership over such a great period of time. And to me, this is by far the most remarkable thing about the Russell contributions, is its continuity of leadership in a decent, honorable, and intelligent fashion.

CATES: Did you know the Senator's father and mother?

ALLEN: No, I did not. Only by--when the Judge--I knew him only by name; [I] never did have the pleasure of knowing him personally.

CATES: When did you first have dealings in an official capacity with Senator Russell?

ALLEN: Well, of course, my actually official dealings came after I was elected mayor of Atlanta and the cities were in, of course, in a number of crises during the sixties. I guess this was the time when all of a sudden mayors became permanent posts in the political set-up of the country; mayors hadn't ever been hardly acknowledged until the sixties when the troubles of the nation moved into the urban centers, and then all of a sudden mayors found themselves, not by their own desire but by the circumstances, elevated into a position of permanent leadership. I soon came to the conclusion that the best and most able help that I could get for the city of Atlanta, both financially and in the field of ideal leadership, was at the national level, and so our association and friendship developed very rapidly as it was necessary for me to move towards the Washington level. Of course, Senator Russell and his office and his staff were highly cooperative; the Senator had developed--which he may have had all along, but certainly by--at this point he had developed an awareness of the nation that made him ideally suited to serve as a representative at the national level, and he had an awareness and an understanding of the needs of the city, although he came from a rural section. By this time, there can't be any question but what he thoroughly understood the nation as a whole, and in every instance in which I would call on him for assistance in Atlanta, I received excellent cooperation.

CATES: In what specific way did he help you as mayor of Atlanta?

ALLEN: Well, one way was advice, which he freely gave to me, as to the best methods by which we could make approaches to secure federal assistance and federal programs--not only in the field of advice, but as an active participant in securing the model cities grant for Atlanta and stepping up the, in getting one of the first major grants for the economic opportunity or War on Poverty program here and securing the necessary funds to carry out urban renewal projects, which was the great rebuilding catalyst that was used in the city here, and to secure the necessary funds for low-income housing units. You see, nearly all the programs to rebuild the cities are federal programs, and therefore, it was at the federal level that we received the help that made it possible for us to lay the foundations for, really, the rebirth and regrowth of the cities.

CATES: I see. Did the Senator ever call you after some particular trying time during your administration? The thing that comes to mind is everybody will remember the time that you were atop a car, and we were having this racial flare-up, and you were almost thrown bodily to the ground. Did the Senator ever contact you after such an incident to offer any suggestions?

ALLEN: Yes, he was very generous in his praise of that situation, and [he] either wrote or called me; I don't recall which. We had a conversation in which he was generous enough to say that he thought I handled it in--the words he used was "in courageous fashion," and of course, I was very grateful for this. There were other instances; I would have to stop and specifically think about one or two other instances. Equally interesting to me was in about 1964, 1965, 1966, somewhere along in there, I had communication from the White House to call on Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges. It was obvious that it was for the purpose of offering me a national appointment, and Senator Russell was in Atlanta that day and contacted me and said, "Look, they're calling you to Washington for, to offer you a very important position; and I'm not going to advise you as to whether you should take it or not, but I do want you to know that they have consulted with me about it, and I have given them a very high recommendation on your qualifications." The position, I did not accept because my responsibility was in Atlanta, but this is indication of Russell's breadth of understanding because at this point he and I were not necessarily thinking alike on the matters of the racial issue.

Senator Russell's position on the racial issue as far as I could detect was one of opposition to any basic changes in the old segregated practices; however, his position in this I always interpreted different from what I did many other people who were opposed to what was called equal opportunity and privilege for Negro people, because his position was one of complete sincerity and he was not reluctant to discuss it, nor did he attempt to evade and try to hide the position. [tape stops and starts again] I would say that Russell's position was one of sincerity in which he actually believed that black people were a separate class and simply could not be brought into the full mainstream of American society. That--he didn't use it as a political vehicle nor did he use it in the form of racism. It was just a very deep underlying conviction of his, a sincere conviction; and there's a great difference between a man who's--who basically--that was the way Russell was raised, that was his background and that was the way he felt; and this, I always could understand. He was not violent or politically motivated in these feelings.

CATES: How do you think the black citizens of Georgia regarded Senator Russell?

ALLEN: My guess would be that they held him in esteem even though he opposed their desire for American citizenship. I really feel that they felt that it was a matter of sincere difference of views--not for any other reason.

CATES: How often did Senator Russell, say, visit in Atlanta to the extent that he was really aware of Atlanta's problems?

ALLEN: Oh, I really don't know how much the Senator was here because he was in and out so many times. He was in and out of Atlanta so much that he didn't go through the normal conventional process of notifying the mayor's office, as normally a United States Senator coming into a city will notify the mayor's office, but he--this was part of his home and he never, naturally, never followed that custom. He was just part of Atlanta, and he was in and out of here all the time.

CATES: Much has been said about the differing political philosophy between the two friends, Senator Russell and President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson; would you comment about this please?

ALLEN: Yes, I would say that, simply, that Johnson changed his views; his views were probably the same as Russell's at one time. As Johnson moved on upward in the federal government, he became convinced of the civil rights issue as well as certain other liberal tendencies, and he changed his position, and Russell stuck to his original convictions; and this was one of the oddities because certainly there was a great gap between Russell and Johnson, although there was an intimate, close friendship. It was simply again the fact that when a man's convictions are sincere, it's possible to have broad differences in views and still be friends. When his convictions are less than sincere then it--I guess friendship is almost impossible.

CATES: Do you have any personal knowledge as to how much the President, President Johnson relied upon his good friend Senator Russell?

ALLEN: Well, only to the extent of what the press has related and what most of us have been able to see through the years, and that is that Senator Russell was probably one of the President's most intimate friends and closest advisors on all matters, whether they agreed on them or not.

CATES: Would you like to comment concerning Senator Russell's lack of participation in so many instances in national elections and--that is, supporting the Democratic ticket? I believe one year he went to Europe and did not support the ticket as far as going around the state and stumping for the national ticket.

ALLEN: Well, this has been true of a great number of elected officials in the South who have not been in, totally, in line with some of the views of the Democratic party, and I think it was a form of dissent.

CATES: How do you affect--how do you think Senator Russell was affected in 1952, when he did not get the Democratic nomination for president?

ALLEN: Well, I don't believe that this worried Senator Russell a great deal. In my own mind, I'm not sure that he ever took himself too seriously about being a candidate for president; and I say this with some *little* degree of inside knowledge to the extent that I along with one or two other people here in Atlanta headed up the big testimonial dinner for the Senator which we held at the, in the old exhibit hall at the Biltmore [Hotel]--and at that time I think it was the largest dinner that we'd ever held in Atlanta; I think we had some eighteen hundred or twenty-one hundred people at a hundred dollars a person and raised a hundred and sixty-eight to a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars which was the major money that launched the Senator's campaign--but I (laughs) I just never did have the feeling that Dick Russell was being--I think he had the breadth of understanding to realize that he was really not going to be the candidate for president. I just think he really made the effort a little bit in order to please some of his friends and maybe to satisfy himself of that conviction.

CATES: What you're saying is that possibly he might have been pressured into making the race or influenced--

ALLEN: Well, what I'm saying is I don't think he ever--he really sent some trial balloons, but I don't think Dick Russell ever fooled himself into thinking at that time that he could be nominated president. I just don't think the cards--although he was thoroughly capable of being President of the United States, I just don't think the cards were stacked that way, and I think he realized it.

CATES: What do you consider the biggest contribution to the public good made by Senator Russell during his thirty-eight years in the Senate?

ALLEN: Well, I really think by far the greatest contribution is the continuity of service and the caliber of it, and I think this overshadows everything else--the continuity of service of the Russell family, his father and himself, over such a long period of time and with such a high degree of intelligence and dignity and accomplishment. I think all of these things--you can't say any one thing is a landmark in the Russell career when you look at the overall record and realize that this is one of the things that's very important in government--is, at certain levels, to have continuity of service and particularly when it comes with such a high degree of capability.

CATES: Did you ever visit Senator Russell in Winder, Georgia, in his home?

ALLEN: Just briefly, on one or two occasions.

CATES: Never was a house guest there alone?

ALLEN: No, no.

CATES: Dinner guest?

ALLEN: No.

CATES: I see. Why do you think the Senator never married? Would you have any observations--?

ALLEN: I haven't the slightest idea. (laughs)

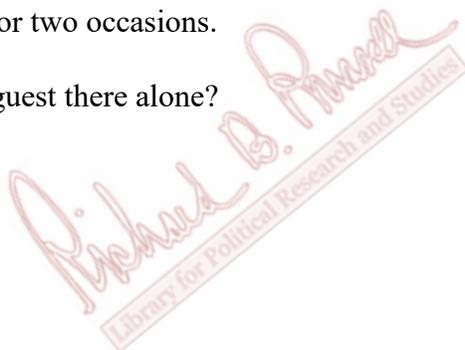
CATES: No observations on that?

ALLEN: I haven't the slightest idea why he never; very few people realize that he never married--

CATES: Right.

ALLEN: --but he was a highly attractive man, and I don't know how he escaped the bonds of matrimony all these years.

CATES: What would you say was his most outstanding personality trait?



ALLEN: Well, I would say his steadfastness, his sustained effort over a long period of time. I always go back to what I said was the great contribution that he made, and this was a characteristic of the family.

CATES: I see. What is the most interesting personal story you have to relate about the Senator?

ALLEN: I don't have any particular story.

CATES: Mayor Allen, do you have anything else that you might want to contribute to this interview for future historians and researchers?

ALLEN: I think we've covered the field.

CATES: Well, thank you very much, sir; and if you can think of anything else in the future, don't hesitate to contact me, and I'll be happy to come down and record it.

ALLEN: Thank you very much.

CATES: Thank you.

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