

Leroy Johnson interviewed by Bob Short

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BOB SHORT: Our guest today is Senator Leroy Johnson, who served in the Georgia Senate back in the days when Georgia had a lot of problems. But Senator Johnson, before we get

into politics let me ask you about you. Get a little information -- background about you. You were born right here in Atlanta. What was it like during your youth here?

LEROY JOHNSON: Well I was born in Atlanta. I was born at Grady Hospital as a matter of fact. Sometimes you get the distinction of being a Grady baby. But I was born at Grady Hospital and at a time in which segregation was at its highest and best. It was the -- I guess you would call -- it was the thing of the day at that time. But I grew up here in Atlanta. I went to Booker T. Washington High School. It was the only high school for blacks in Atlanta at that time. And I finished there and went to Morehouse College. I went to Morehouse. I was 17 when I entered Morehouse. And that perhaps was the defining moment in my life, when I went to Morehouse and what I got after I got there. I had almost accepted segregation without realizing that I had done so. I'd accepted segregation as a matter of course. And I say that because I use to go to the Fox Theatre downtown in Atlanta. And when you go to the Fox Theatre at that time you had to pay your money in the front and go around the back and go up the steps to the balcony and to see the movie. Well, I did that without realizing what I was doing. I wanted to see a movie, so I went to the segregated theatre.

Well, I was accepted into Morehouse. When I was 17 I entered Morehouse -- on that Monday. The Sunday before that Monday I went to the Fox Theatre as I'd always done, paid my money, went around to the back. That Tuesday, Dr. Mays -- Benjamin E. Mays, he was the President of Morehouse College and later became President of the -- of the Atlanta Board of Education. But he was President of Morehouse College. And he -- on that Tuesday morning -- spoke to us from

the student body -- spoke to the student body in Chapel. And Chapel was a requirement for all Morehouse men to attend. Every morning, 9:00 you had to be at Chapel. But that morning he talked about segregation and the evil of segregation. And he said, "Morehouse men must never ever pay for segregation, because segregation robs you of your dignity and it assumes that one group of people are greater than the other group of people. See, so we must never pay for segregation." And then Dr. Mays said, "When you go to a theatre and go to the back of the theatre and go upstairs and you pay to do that, you're paying for segregation. And when you do that you're suggesting that the people who were downstairs -- who went in the front door -- were better than you." And I sat there and I thought that Dr. Mays was talking directly to me. I thought he saw me that Sunday going to the Fox Theatre, and I thought he was talking to me. And that was the defining moment of my life. I never ever went to another segregated theatre.

And it was from that point on that I began to realize my -- I think my own destiny, the way in which I was going. He said in that same setting and on that same day, talking to Morehouse men, he said, "You must get yourselves an ideal and cling to it and worship it as though it was almighty God, because in order to survive in a segregated society you must be ironclad and steel girded." And it was that ironclad and steel girded philosophy that I got at Morehouse that became the defining moment of my life that determined the course that I would take and how I would approach segregation and other challenging -- and subjects.

And so, that was what it was like growing up. Then I left there and I went to North Carolina and got my -- I went to law school in North Carolina and got my degree in law in North Carolina and came back to Atlanta and started from there. But I went into the Solicitor -- into the Attorney

Assistant General's Office -- and then it was Solicitor-General, now it's the Attorney General's Office. And then left there and went into practicing law and then into politics.

SHORT: Yes. Well you were not able to get into the Georgia law schools.

JOHNSON: No. And that's the reason I went to North Carolina. During the days in which I was growing up there was -- blacks could not go to the University of Georgia. So they had created here a unique system. If you couldn't go to University of Georgia, the state would pay you to go or give you an allowance -- a certain amount -- to go to an out-of-state school rather than go to the University of Georgia. So, they called it State Aid. So, I could not go to the University of Georgia where I probably would have gone if segregation had not prevented me from doing so. So, I went to North Carolina -- to a school in Durham, North Carolina -- and submitted an application to the state for state aid. And the state paid a substantial amount of my fees for law school in North Carolina. And then when I finished North Carolina I came back here, of course, and began practicing law.

SHORT: You turned down a good offer, I believe, from a firm in Tuskegee.

JOHNSON: That's right. That's right. Tuskegee is not too far from Atlanta, but it was -- it's a town where the black population is prevalent. Tuskegee Institution is in Tuskegee.

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

JOHNSON: And so, I was offered by the -- I guess the business people there to come to Tuskegee to set up practice. And I would have been, of course, the only lawyer -- black lawyer there in Tuskegee. But A.T. Walden, who was here, had been very effective in getting the black vote to vote for Paul Webb, who was then the Solicitor-General, and a part of the deal that Walden made with him is that, "We'll help you get elected but you need to hire some black people in your office." And so, Paul Webb got elected with Walden's help.

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

JOHNSON: And after he got elected, he told Walden -- he said, "I will put on -- if you have someone and you recommend them to me, I will put him in my office as an investigator in the Solicitor-General's office." And so, Walden called me and asked me if I would do that. And then I had to make a choice between going to Tuskegee and then going into Solicitor's General office, which is the District Attorney's office now. And I thought that I would go into the District Attorney's office -- the Solicitor General's office. And I decided to go there rather than going to Tuskegee, and hindsight, of course, is better than foresight. It's the best decision I ever made, to go into the Solicitor-General's office, and that's what I did. I went there and worked in the -- was the first black to be in the Solicitor-General's office and took the bar while I was in the office, passed the bar, then came out and started practicing.

SHORT: Did you feel at that time that you wanted to get into public service?

JOHNSON: I thought that there was a possibility. When Walden called me and asked me to – if I would consider going into the Solicitor-General's office, it was a great decision I had to make, because I could have gone to Tuskegee and been the lawyer. But Tuskegee is a very small place, a very small town, and I had to make the decision as to whether I wanted to go to a smaller town and be a big fish.

SHORT: Right.

JOHNSON: Relatively speaking! Or to stay in Atlanta and probably grow because of the great strength in Atlanta. And decided to do that. So I turned down the opportunity to go to Tuskegee, and stayed in Atlanta. And decided then that I wanted to do something in terms of public service, and that was the main reason.

SHORT: And then there was reapportionment.

JOHNSON: Yes.

SHORT: And reapportionment opened the door.

JOHNSON: That's exactly right. There was one – at that time, it was – the County Unit System was prevalent in Georgia, and the County Unit System was a system that was created by legislature to give the rural counties more power than urban counties. And so, the suit was filed and the decision came out. And that decision was one man one vote, and when reapportionment came -- when that happened -- I decided to run for the Senate. And I ran for the Senate and got elected as a result of that -- as a result of reapportionment. And the question was – the question was raised then, we ran on a countywide basis and someone brought suit that you have to be elected on a – not a countywide basis, but on a district basis.

SHORT: Yes.

JOHNSON: And when that suit came up and it came before – was going before Judge Pine, and Judge Pine had indicated in the past that he was not necessarily friendly toward blacks -- to Negroes. And I was very concerned about the outcome, because Judge Pine was – had to rule in that case. But Pine ruled that the vote had to be cast on a district basis. And I was from the 38th District, and therefore, I was able to win the election.

SHORT: And you took your seat in 1963.

JOHNSON: '62.

SHORT: '62.

JOHNSON: Well I was elected in '62 –

SHORT: 1962.

JOHNSON: You're right, I took the seat in '63.

SHORT: You must have felt like Jackie Robinson the day he stepped on Ebbets-Field.

JOHNSON: I guess you could – that's – you're probably right. It was an experience that I will never forget. I went into the General Assembly in '63, and there were those who really thought that because I was present the ceiling would fall and the seats would crumble.

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: They thought that. And for the first some 40 days that I was there, not one Senator spoke to me except those who were in my delegation from Atlanta. I would walk down the corridors of the Senate -- of the halls in the Senate -- and Senators would be coming in the opposite direction. I'm going in one direction, they'd be coming in the opposite direction, and I

would say, "Good morning, Senator." And the reply would be, "Mmm." And I would continue to say, "Good morning, Senator." As I met them I would say, "Good morning, Senator." And the response would be, "Mmm." I thought for one time maybe that was their name but –

Laughter

JOHNSON: But they never would say anything! The interesting thing about it is that just before the session ended -- maybe two weeks or maybe three weeks before the session ended -- all that session none of them had spoken to me. I was on a committee -- had been appointed to a committee, as other Senators had -- and on this particular occasion I was late going to a committee meeting, and before I got to the committee the bill had been discussed in committee. And the procedure is that you discuss the bill in committee and then someone makes a motion to pass it -- to pass it out of the committee so it – and if it passes out of committee it goes back to the Senate floor to be voted on by the Senators. Well, just as I got to the door of the meeting, the bill had been discussed in the committee and a vote had been taken, it was a tie vote. I didn't know that. When I opened the door and walked in, the Senators who were on both sides of the table jumped up, ran over to me, and grabbed me and said, "Senator, I need your vote."

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: These were the same Senators who had not spoken to me for the whole session!

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: And they ran over to me and said, "Senator, I need your vote." And I stood there, and I wondered to myself, "What happened to my blackness?"

Laughter

JOHNSON: All of a sudden they saw a – what they saw was not a black Senator walking in the room. They saw a vote.

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: And they jumped up and said, "Senator, I need your vote." Well, I had three bills in the committee that they had already decided that they were going to send to what they called the cement factory.

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: It would never get out. But before I decided to vote, I said, "I want my bills pulled up and passed out of the committee." They pulled my three bills up, dusted them off, passed

them out and then I voted to break the tie.

What I really learned was that – how important a vote was. In spite of the fact that I had been there for 40 days and none of them had spoken to me -- only because of my skin, only because of my color -- when they needed a vote, they pushed color aside and said, "Senator, I need your vote." I realized then how tremendously important a vote was. If I didn't know, I knew then how important it was. And out of all my experience there in the General Assembly, I've learned one lesson. I've learned many lessons, but among the many was one! And that is, in politics you get not what you deserve, but what you can negotiate.

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

JOHNSON: And that was one thing that I learned there. Did I deserve to be treated equally? Yes. Deserve to have my bills considered on its merit and passed out? Yes. But you get not what you deserve.

Laughter

JOHNSON: You get what you can negotiate.

SHORT: Right.

JOHNSON: And I negotiated my bills to get out of the committee.

SHORT: When you first went to the Capitol there were still racial segregated signs, water fountains, restrooms, even the cafeteria. Did that cause you any great problems?

JOHNSON: Well, it did when I first got there, but I also knew that I had some responsibility and some duty to try to desegregate the state Capitol. And the one thing that I had probably on my – in my favor, was in my process to do so, there was a young man on the second floor who was a Governor of the state, who was Carl Sanders, who decided that history was not going to be recorded that he was – well, let me put it this way. He decided, in my own mind, that history was going to look favorably upon him. So, when I sought to desegregate the Capitol I really had an ally on the second floor, though I did not know it at that time. The sign on the water fountain saying Colored and White. Well, I had some black pages come and I had them stand in line and drink water from the sign that – from the fountain that had White over it. And one of the guards came up and said, "You can't do that. You see this sign saying White and Colored? You have to drink from this fountain over here." I said, "No, I'm a state Senator, these are my pages; they're going to drink from here." So, he obviously goes downstairs to talk to the Governor and he never came back, the next day the signs were removed -- Colored and White.

The same about the restrooms, all had signs Colored and White, and when I went to the Senate in 1962 – in '63 rather -- a black person had never eaten at the State cafeteria. And so, I decided to go to the cafeteria. Joe Seldman, who was in the Senate with me, and accompanied me to the

cafeteria – to the state cafeteria. When we walked in the lady I think at the counter who would always accept your money, and permit you to go forward, says, "I'm sorry, but you can't come in here; we don't serve negroes." And I said, "I understand that it is your policy, but I'm a state Senator who happen to be a Negro and I want to be served." She said, "We can't do that." I said, "I suggest you go and talk to your supervisor." So we're standing here, the line is behind us, so she goes and talks to someone, and in about ten minutes she comes back and says, "Give me your money."

And so, I gave her the money and took the tray and Joe Seldman and I walked in. And the cafeteria, it was a large room and they had long tables and you could sit on each side of the table. And this cafeteria was pretty full. And there was one table with some empty seats. And so, I walked over to the table with Joe walking behind me or beside me, and as I set my tray down on the table all the white persons got up from the table. And I sat my tray down and they got up. And so, we sat down. And then the table that was next to us, which also was full of whites, they got up. And the table on the left of us that was full or quite, they got up. And so, we sat there and had the – almost the whole cafeteria. And Joe Seldman turned to me and said, "Leroy." He says, "You're the craziest thing since the Metro Cam."

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: And if you recall, MetroCam then was that – it was a medical product.

SHORT: Right.

JOHNSON: Which made you feel good after certain things happened. But anyway, that's what happened. After that, the following day I carried some of my pages there and we just walked right in, took a seat, nobody would sit next to us and we just – we ate. But that was what I consider my burden. That's what I had to do. But I did it without fanfare. I didn't call the presses, "Come in, I'm going to desegregate the Capitol of Washington, see what I do.! I did it because I thought it's something I had to do, number one. It was wrong to have a system by which you're favored and I'm not favored, and I knew that. And so, I can always really go back to the defining moment in my life at Morehouse when I got the inspiration from Morehouse to do what I later on did. But I always say that if Carl Sanders had not been governor it probably would have been a more difficult task for me. And we developed a relationship from the time that I went into the Senate up until today. And I talked to him about -- I think three or four weeks ago -- and that relationship still exists.

SHORT: Well, you broke the ice, you accumulated friends, you became the chairman of a very important committee -- all of that within a short distance of time.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes. And it was the Chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee that further strengthened my belief that relationships are extremely important. It so happens that the question came up in the Senate as to who – as to whether or not the presiding officer would be

able to continue to appoint committee Chairmen and committee members. They had been guided by the practice of the Senate for many years. But Maddox then was Lieutenant Governor

--

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

JOHNSON: And Carter – Governor Carter -- wanted to change the rules so that a committee would appoint Chairmen of committees and determine who's on the committee, rather than the presiding officer or Lieutenant Governor. And so, that was the big fight. Who would control that situation?

Well, I wanted to be Chairman of the Judiciary Committee. And so, I went to Governor Carter and I said, "Governor, I want to be Chairman of the committee, and if you appoint me Chairman of the committee I'll vote with you on this issue." It was a very close issue. Who would – whether or not Maddox would – the Lieutenant Governor would maintain the right to appoint Chairmen of committees or whether it would go to a committee. And so, Carter says, "No." He says, "I've already agreed to give that to a -- the position of Chairman of the Judiciary Committee." I think he said, "To Senator Webb." And he says, "But I'll make you chairman of the Temperance Committee."

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: And I said, "Governor, I'm a lawyer; I'm not a drinker! *Laughter* I don't want to be Chairman of the Temperance Committee, I want to be Chairman of the Judiciary Committee!" And he said, "No, I can't do that." I said, "Well, I may have to vote with the other side." And Carter said to me, "Well, you can't do that; you can't vote with the other side because Maddox picked the other side and you can't vote with Maddox." I said, "Okay, Governor, we'll see."

So, I went back to my office and Maddox had Culver Kidd -- Senator Culver Kidd -- to come to me and ask me if I would vote with him. And I said to Culver, "I want the Chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee." And Culver said, "That's a big committee." I said, "I understand that." Well, it was one of the most powerful committees in the Senate. The Judiciary Committee, the Rules Committee, the Education Committee, and the Finance Committee, those are the most powerful committees. So I said, "But that's what I want." He said, "Well, I got to go back and talk to Lieutenant Government Maddox." I said, "Okay, you do that." Culver goes back and talks with him. He comes back to me and he says, "The Governor said -- the Lieutenant Governor says he'll appoint you to the Judiciary Committee." I said, "Now, Culver, one other thing that I must have -- there are seven members on the committee." I said, "I want the right to appoint or to name three of them, because I would be the fourth one."

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

JOHNSON: He said, "You're always coming up with something! Let me go back to the

Governor." So he goes back to elect Maddox and he came back later and says, "Okay, we'll appoint you Chairman and you can appoint three of them – of the members of that committee – of the seven person committee." So I said, "Okay, I'll let you know." I went back to the Governor – to Carter -- and I said, "Governor." I said, "I want to vote with you, but I want to be Chairman of the Judiciary Committee and I've already got a commitment from Lieutenant Governor Maddox to make me Chairman. Will you make me chairman?" He said, "No." He said, "You can't vote with Maddox!" I said, "Okay, Governor, all right, thank you."

Now, what Governor Carter failed to realize is that my vote for Maddox – if I had voted for Lieutenant Governor to maintain that position -- I was not voting for Maddox, I was voting for history as I saw it. History that a black man become Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, a very powerful committee. And if I did it then somewhere down the line in the future other black people could do it. Carter didn't see that. He just saw Maddox was a segregation, I was black, and I had to vote anything against him. And I said, "What Maddox failed – what Governor Carter failed to see is that I was voting for the future." So I went back and told Culver Kidd, I said, "Culver, I'll go with you. You maintain – you keep your promise to me." And he said, "Okay."

So, at the Senate at that time, everybody voted by hand. We didn't have electronic machines. We had to vote by hand. The vote came to the floor of the Senate, and as God would have it, that vote passed by one vote. And I held my hand up, and the vote was that the Lieutenant Governor maintain the power to appoint committee Chairmen. Carter lost. Lieutenant Governor Maddox won. But I became Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, and then I appointed the

first black to serve as an assistant to the Judiciary Committee. They gave me an office. I had the first black secretary to serve in the state Senate as a secretary to a standing committee. And as a result of that, we were able to, I think, make a tremendous amount of progress. Because then the question was no longer whether a black could be Chairman -- because I had proven that -- and so then others just had to be elected to become Chairman. And that was the -- that was the result of -- and there again, the theory that you get not what you deserve in politics, but what you can negotiate became evident to me.

SHORT: *Laughter* That's right.

JOHNSON: And that was a part of it.

SHORT: Well, speaking of Culver Kidd, who were your closest friends in the Senate?

JOHNSON: Well, Culver was certainly one of them. And the gentleman from -- Bob Smalley from Griffin, Georgia, prince of a fellow, was another. Smalley, Culver Kidd, the gentleman from Augusta -- from Savannah -- a very fine Senator from Savannah --

SHORT: Jack Riley?

JOHNSON: Jack Riley. But this one was -- he used to -- he has -- he was known in the Senate by

when a bill passed and appears to have just had –

SHORT: Frank Downey?

JOHNSON: Frank Downey.

Laughter

JOHNSON: That's who it was! He became a very good friend of mine. And I had a good relationship with most of the men in the Senate.

SHORT: Good.

JOHNSON: And it's that relationship that I really cherish. I developed friends there. And the one thing that I can say about the Senate, the friendship that you develop there always – they seem to always have longevity to it.

SHORT: The class of '63.

JOHNSON: That's right.

SHORT: They're still looked upon as one of the finest Senates this state has ever had.

JOHNSON: And Hugh Gillis was my friend. Became a very good friend of mine. Hugh Gillis.

SHORT: Your class had one President, two Governors, Mayors, public serve commissioners, judges, and has been looked upon as one of the finest Senates that we've ever had. But your election, Senator, in '62 inspired other black candidates, and as I recall, shortly after you were elected, Horace Ward --

JOHNSON: That's right.

SHORT: -- was elected to the Senate and became the second black state Senator, and at the same time there were a number of members of the House of Representatives who came into that.

JOHNSON: That's correct.

SHORT: Julian Bond and Bill Alexander, as I recall, and others. What was the -- was there planning behind that? Did -- was there a coalition that got together to bring forth these candidates or did they just pop up on their own?

JOHNSON: Well, there was somewhat of a concerted effort also. And then, of course, there are

always those who were going to run anyway. But what we tried to do – was an organization that was spawned by A.T. Walden, who was a black lawyer. Dobbs, who was head of the Masonic Organization; he was a Republican. Yates, who was from Milton; he was a Republican. Warren Cochran, who was head of the Butler Street YMCA; he was a Democrat. And the Atlanta Voters League was an organization for both black Republicans and Democrats, because in a city election it was non-partisan.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: And so you came together in order to get it perfected, and in order to assist in getting a good Mayor for the city of Atlanta, but that's how the organization came to be. Hartsfield had said that he would do a lot of things for blacks if the blacks would get the ballot -- if blacks would vote. And so, the Atlanta Voters League came into existence. But as a result of that, we had a very close-knit organization. And after I got elected we – it was a group that came together and says, "We need to see what we can do in terms of getting other blacks elected also." And so, that was – out of that core came J.C. Doherty, who got elected, Ben Brown, and two or three others.

SHORT: Julian Bond?

JOHNSON: Julian Bond. Julian Bond. Ben Brown, and there was one other. Julian Bond, Ben

Brown, J.C. Doherty, and I think his name was Thomas, but it was one other person that was a part of that conversation, which led to all of them getting involved in it.

SHORT: Okay. Well the Civil Rights Movement fostered activity, the Voter Education Project, did that assist these minority candidates in their races?

JOHNSON: Well, no question it did. And particularly, there was a – what's his name? There was a – the Voter Education Program was headed by – one of the persons was Wiley Branton who assisted us a great deal, and Vernon Jordan.

SHORT: Vernon?

JOHNSON: Yeah, Vernon Jordan. And Vernon Jordan was with the urban league and then with the voter registration project. But that was extremely helpful and they also provide some funds.

SHORT: To get out to vote.

JOHNSON: To get out to vote. Right.

SHORT: Well, you had a great career in the Senate. I wanted to ask you about your relationship with Governor Sanders, which you have told us about, and your relationship with

Governor Carter. In 1970 those two fine people ran for Governor against each other. Did you take any role in that campaign?

JOHNSON: My role was – well, let me put it this way. My – I was very much in favor of Governor Sanders, without any question. He was the Governor when I was elected and we had developed a very close relationship, and we maintained that relationship. I tried to do two things. When Governor Carter came to me and asked me if I would support him, I told him of my relationship with Sanders. And that relationship maintained itself and I did not – I was not one of those who – many blacks did endorse Jimmy Carter. And I did not do that because of my relationship with Governor Sanders. And Carter, of course, won the election. But the interesting thing is that – let me put it this way, because that was the election that perhaps in the beginning, the political prognosticators predicted that Carl Sanders would win -- that Carl Sanders would win. And he did not, of course. But my feelings and my efforts were to have Sanders. And I never regretted that because we developed a very strong friendship.

SHORT: A lot of people believe that Jimmy Carter ran an unfair race against Governor Sanders by bringing the race issue in and accusing him of being pro-integration and that sort of thing. Do you think that had an effect on the outcome of the election?

JOHNSON: I think it did. I think that – I really think it did. I think it had some effect, the degree to which I'm not sure, but I'm almost certain that it had some effect. And Sanders felt

very, very much wounded by that kind of attack, but I think it did have some effect.

SHORT: Well, let me move forward now. You had a good career in the Senate. You were able to get along with all the Senators and they appreciated you and you grew and then you decided to run for Mayor. Any particular reason you wanted to get out of the Senate?

JOHNSON: No, I think that was – that was not one of the wisest decisions that I've made in my life – in my lifetime. I was listening, I think, to some of my supporters, some of my friends, saying that, you know, "You're the first black Senator, you ought to be the first black Mayor." It doesn't follow that way.

(Phone ringing)

JOHNSON: That doesn't follow and – but anyway, I ran and it was a good race. I went against Maynard Jackson and Maynard Jackson won the election. But I enjoyed being in the city and probably would have remained in the city if I had not decided to run for Mayor. But I did make that decision and you have to live with the decision that you make and you go ahead and make the best of it. But in hindsight, I probably should not have ran. You know, but at that time I didn't know that. At that time, I said, "Look, you know, we can do it. We can do it." And we ran and I had a real passion for Atlanta. I love this city. I was born and raised here and I wanted to see – I wanted to see it grow and I wanted to see -- and there are a lot of things that I wanted

to do. And I thought that was an opportunity to do those things.

SHORT: Jimmy Carter did quite a bit to break down the barriers of segregation when he was Governor.

JOHNSON: Yes.

SHORT: And of course, Governor Busbee was a great developer of this state. Who do you think is the best Governor we've had in the 20th century?

JOHNSON: I think you've got to look at Sanders and Barnes. Governor Carter was a good Governor. One thing he said when he got elected -- that segregation must go. That was in his inaugural speech and that tends to set some kind of pace as it relate to relationships . That was – I'll always admire him for making that statement. But in terms of Governors, I would think that Sanders or Barnes.

SHORT: What do you think about your colleague in the Senate, Zell Miller, and his speaking to the Republican Convention?

JOHNSON: Well, I just thought that was unfortunate. It was difficult for me to see how Zell could take that position. See, every – every advancement, every political achievement that Zell

made has been as a Democrat. And whatever money that he has made he made as a Democrat. And then to just abandon the Democratic party in that fashion was just difficult for me to see and to accept, you know. He was appointed to the Senate by a Democrat. And I was in the Senate when Zell was coming up, when he was making his – when he was trying to have upward mobility in politics. He was one of the persons in the Senate who would call the role and do things like that. But everything he – all of his political know-how came as a result of being a Democrat. And then – I just think it was a betrayal.

SHORT: What did you think when Lester Maddox, who had been Governor, turned around and got elected Lieutenant Governor, which implied that he was very, very popular in the state at the time and yet the state was making great progress toward achieving what we now enjoy, which is probably the premier city in the South – I mean state in the South, and city of Atlanta! How did you react to that?

JOHNSON: Well, I thought then that – I was surprised that he won, but that was the core in Georgia statewide, that Maddox appealed to. And I had to take the position, because we had a meeting right after he was elected to find out whether or not we were going in the opposite direction, you know. And sometimes you said -- and I said to them -- you know, "In history sometimes there is a disproportionate – that no, I don't think we going the right direction." Did Maddox get elected? Yes. But is that – but does his election mean that Georgia is going to go in the opposite direction heading downward. And I said, "No, I don't believe that. It was a fluke.

He got elected, but his election did not -- in my judgment -- did not deter this state from moving forward in a way in which Governor Carter -- I mean Governor Sanders, or Barnes, or someone else would have moved it." But Maddox -- you got to go back. Maddox was a very -- what do you --

SHORT: Charismatic.

JOHNSON: Charismatic. A very charismatic character. And some people didn't like his philosophy, but liked him.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: And they voted for him. You know? But his election did not turn Georgia back into the days of slavery where they had not a very good reputation at all. And I didn't think it did. As a matter of fact, what I got to learn about Maddox as I served under him when he was Governor was two things. Number one is that he says one thing for political reasons or whatever -- or for whatever reason -- and he does something else, you know. And I learned that because I had to go to him at the time that I was getting the license for Muhammad Ali to fight. Some 56 cities had turned Ali down and said he could not fight because he did not go into the Vietnam War. I got a call from a fellow named Harry Pat, and he said, "If we can get -- if you can get him a license in Atlanta we can put him on a fight -- that we can get a contract where Ali would fight

here in Atlanta." So, I had my staff to look at the statute and there was no law in the books governing boxing at that time. So, I called Pat and said, "We can get him a license because as to whether or not a license would be granted, that addresses the City Council -- and that was to the Mayor and to the City Council of Atlanta." Well I had just helped Sam Massell get elected and I had helped many of the members of the council get elected, so I said, "We can get him a license here." And I then sought to get him a license to fight in Atlanta. A part of that process was that when the word got out that he was going to fight here, the question was whether or not the Governor would stop it, whether or not Maddox would stop it. So I went to him and I said, "Governor, I got an opportunity to get a license for Ali to fight, and Ali doesn't know anything but fighting; that's his profession and if he doesn't fight he's going to have to go on welfare." Governors oppose the welfare, that's why I said that.

Laughter

JOHNSON: And then at that time, Governor Maddox' son had gotten into trouble in DeKalb County. Hub caps or something that was in question. And the judge of DeKalb County said to his son, "Well, when it came to sentencing, I'm going to give you another chance. I'm going to give you another chance. I'm going to let you -- instead of putting you in jail, I'm going to let you report on the weekend and resolve the matter." So when I went to Maddox, I said to him, and this was about a week after the Governor -- after the judge had said to his son, "I'll give you another chance." I went to Maddox and I said, "All I'm asking, Governor, is to give Ali another

chance so that he can fight. That's what his – what he knows – that's what he can do. That's his profession." And so, Maddox said to me -- and under that umbrella -- give him another chance, he said, "Okay, on with the fight."

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: So, I walk out of his office and Aldrid Marays of WSB was on the outside of his office. He said, "What did the Governor say?" I said, "The governor said on with the fight." And so the newspaper came out that night saying Governor Maddox okayed the fight. When that happened, the white citizen council and everybody else started raving saying – some people shot at my window at home.

SHORT: Oh, my goodness.

JOHNSON: And Maddox the next day says, "No, he will not fight here." He changed his mind. He says, "No, he's not going to fight here." So I called Carl Sanders, and I said, "We're in trouble, Governor." I said, "Governor Maddox says that he's going to try to stop the fight." And so, Sanders says, "Well, let me call you back." So he called Arthur Bolton. Arthur Bolton was Attorney General. Sanders had appointed him Attorney General. And Arthur Bolton came out the next day and said that the Governor had no authority to stop the fight, because there was no laws in Georgia governing boxing. And when he said that -- Maddox says -- he did nothing.

Maddox did nothing. We went ahead and got the license and October the 26, 1970, at the City Auditorium, Ali fought for the first time in five years. And we returned him to the boxing world by getting the license for him to fight in Atlanta, Georgia. And he fought, as I said, on October the 26, 1970. And that was the beginning of Ali going all the way back to becoming champion again.

SHORT: That's a very interesting story. Incidentally, we had a conversation with Governor Sanders and he reminded us of the time that you went to a committee meeting at the Commerce Club.

JOHNSON: Yes.

SHORT: Do you remember that?

JOHNSON: *Laughter* Yes, I certainly do! It was a time when the Governor had stated that he was going to meet – all Senators were invited to a luncheon at the Commerce Club. The Commerce Club had a policy of serving white only and it's been their policy for I don't know how many years. So, when I went to the Commerce Club I walked in the door and the Maitre d' says, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yes, where are the Senators have their luncheon? I'm going to the lunch." He said, "You can't do that. We don't serve Negroes here." I said, "Are the Senators having a luncheon in here?" He said, "Yes, they're having it there in the room at the

end of the hall." And I said, "Well, I'm going to that luncheon." He says, "We do not serve -- you cannot go there."

So I just walked by him and continued to walk to the room. And when I got to the room -- it was a big room and Hugh Gillis was there and two or three other Senators were there, so I walked in and I sat at the end of the table. The waiters and waitresses were lined up against the wall waiting for everybody to come in. And when I sat at the table the Maitre d' came and picked up the plate in front of me, the utensils in front of me, and carried them out, the plate, the knife, the fork and the water -- took them all off the table. So, I told Hugh Gillis, I said, "Hugh," I said. "I'm suggesting that you had better call the Governor or someone because if I don't get served here I'm going to call WSB and all the other newspapers and we're going to really have it out." I said, "I've tried to desegregate the Capitol and the facilities without fanfare." I said, "But if have to, I'm going to call the press." So Hugh Gillis went to the telephone and about 15 minutes later Hugh Gillis came back and sat down. And about 10 or 15 minutes later the same Maitre d' that carried all of the utilities in front of me -- my plate out -- he walked back into the room, set the plate down in front of me, put the knives and forks and -- beside it, the napkin and the water, set it -- the whole table set up and then he walked out. And when he did that -- the waiters and waitresses who were lined against the wall just started applauding. They started applauding! And we sat there and the meeting started. And what had happened is that Carl Sanders -- Hugh Gillis had called the Governor, Carl Sanders said call --

SHORT: Mills Lane.

JOHNSON: Mills Lane. *Laughter* And Mills Lane had called the Commerce Club and they put it back into order. And the process went on. I didn't call the press. We had lunch and we left there and – but that was the incident at the Commerce Club.

SHORT: You're a pioneer.

JOHNSON: *Laughter* Yes.

SHORT: You were – you helped form an organization known as GABEO. I think you were the first Chairman or President.

JOHNSON: That's right.

SHORT: That's grown into quite a big, powerful organization in state politics. You still – are you still connected with them?

JOHNSON: Only as kind of an advisor. Tyrone Brooks is my personal friend and he's now President. And I've always – he always called me – he'll call me and we'll talk about problems and solution to problems. And then I have spoken to that organization on numerous occasions. But they are moving right along.

SHORT: Well, in your first race you had great bipartisan support. You had the business folks behind you and – so you were able to really be a strong factor in minority politics, not only in the state, but in the country.

JOHNSON: Yes. The interesting thing is that there was a young lady by the name of Johnnie Yancey, who was married to a doctor here and she became my treasurer. And we began to immediately try to put together a program by which we approached the business community, and we did that and they were very responsive and we were able to run a very significant campaign. And a part of the total thrust that we had was that we never sought to polarize the community.

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

JOHNSON: We talked about what was good for Atlanta was good for everybody. And it was that kind of race that we ran. And it was that kind of response that we got from the business community. And when I got elected to the Senate as the first black Senator from Georgia in a hundred years -- and we'd get these invitations to speak all over the country -- part of my message was "Come South, young man, come South." And because of the progress that we were making in Georgia, that we could – that I thought was very fortunate to our cause. And so, I spoke all over this country, but this was in the 60s and part of my message was "Come South, young man, come South" because things were changing.

SHORT: Including Henry Aaron.

JOHNSON: That's right. That's exactly right.

SHORT: You talked with Henry Aaron.

JOHNSON: Talked to Henry Aaron and sent him a letter and said, "Come to Atlanta." That's when the Braves were considering whether they were going to move to Atlanta and there were some people who were saying that, "You know, you talk about going to Georgia – you talk about going to Georgia, you don't really want to do that. Georgia's reputation is pretty bad." But I sent Henry Aaron a letter and said, "You know, things are changing here. And come to Georgia."

SHORT: If you could look back on your career, would you change it? Would you do anything differently?

JOHNSON: Well I guess hindsight is always better than foresight. But I would not. I would do what I did. I had an opportunity to make a contribution to history and I did that. I went in the Senate and I knew that I had to function in such a way in which other blacks could follow me. And that's what I did. I had one policy when I went into the Senate in 1962, and that was going

into a hostile area -- a society -- a group. I had one philosophy and that was friendship toward all and entangling alliances with none. And I used that so that I could make friends, be effective, and still have no baggage by which I could not do what I set out to do. So friendship toward all was my philosophy and entangling alliances with none. And that proved to be very effective for me, you know, and I developed friendships there that lasted to today, like Carl Sanders and Hugh Gillis.

SHORT: And Bob Short! *Laughter*

JOHNSON: And Bob Short, right! *Laughter* You know, so I would not do it. I would do exactly what I did. Some people said, you know, I should have gone farther -- create a problem. But at that time I thought that I could make history by showing I could be an effective legislator as anybody else. All I wanted was the opportunity to use my mind, to use my experience, to use my talent. And that's all I wanted. And I said to them, "You know, you give me this opportunity, and that's what I did in the Senate."

SHORT: Senator, you mentioned negotiation is the best way to succeed in politics. After the incident where you discussed your vote and negotiated with the committee, were you accepted by the Senators after that?

JOHNSON: That was the beginning. After that, it seemed that the ice had broken. There were

those Senators who never spoke to me during that first session, actually touched me and put their hands on me when they said, "I want your vote." That seemed to have broken the ice and then the next session the reception was warmer, and they then obviously had realized -- or come to believe -- that the ceiling was not going to fall, the seat was not going to crumble because I was there.

And then they had never had any experience of dealing with a black man before. They thought - - I'm assuming -- that all black men had to be ferocious, were going to try to cut their necks or stab them or something. I don't know what they thought! But then I think they observed me and saw that I was rational, that I had a fairly decent mind, that I was articulate. I would go to the well of the Senate and I would talk about issues and I would talk about this Senate, what this Senate ought to do, and how we as a Senate can do more and such. And I won some friends, I think, as -- because of my approach.

But the second session the whole reaction was quite different. They began to accept me as a Senator. But the significant thing about it is that when I went there the first year, not one of them spoke to me. When I left there wasn't one who did not speak to me. All of them were there on one occasion when I put a bill in to be voted on and when it came up for vote the bill did not pass. And in the rules of the Senate, you can bring it up the next day and ask that it be passed.

And when my bill did not pass I went to the telephone -- and we had this phone where you could call all over the state. And I called black people in Athens, Augusta, Savannah, and others to tell them to call their Senator and ask them to vote for my bill. And the next day when the bill came up I moved for reconsideration, that's what you ask for -- reconsideration. And when I asked for

reconsideration they called my bill up and my bill passed on reconsideration. And then the Senator from Enigma.

SHORT: Bobby Rowan.

JOHNSON: Bobby Rowan came up to me and said, "Senator Johnson, you got the best organization in Georgia."

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: Because some of his constituents had called him and told him to vote for my bill. But we had the Georgia Voters League, which had – which had memberships in many of the counties, not all 159 but in the larger counties and others. And I had called him and asked him to call the Senate. But Bobby Rowan said to me, "You've got the strongest and most effective organization in Georgia." And Bobby Rowan became my friend, and Bobby Rowan was from south Georgia, Enigma, Georgia. But he became my friend. But as to your question is that the ice began to crack at that meeting and after that they acceptance became – came along very well and I was accepted in the Senate. One point I just really want to make to talk about acceptance -- the Chairman of the Finance Committee was from Augusta, Georgia – a Senator from Augusta, Georgia, and I'll tell you his name in a just a minute.

SHORT: Fuqua?

JOHNSON: Not Fuqua. I think he was from Augusta. He was a very close friend of Carl Sanders.

SHORT: Gene Holley.

JOHNSON: Gene Holley. You have a great memory. *Laughter* Gene Holley was Chairman of the committee. Well, I'd been in the Senate for a couple of years or three years and I thought that acceptance was fairly well. And on this occasion Gene Holley came to me and said, "Senator, he says. "At the break I want you to come up to room 403 and we're going to have – we're having a meeting there." So I said, "Okay." He didn't tell me what. And I went on to lunch and I came back and when I came back the meeting had already started and I went up to that meeting. And he had his committee there and around the table was members of that Finance Committee, Culver Kidd and others all around the table. And they were dividing up the money that was to be voted on in the bill. And so, they would go around the table and ask each Senator, "What do you want?" Culver Kidd said, "I want X number of dollars for Milledgeville – for a hospital in Milledgeville." And I'm sitting there amazed as they were going around the room and they were determining what they – amount of money they want from the budget. And so he got to me and Gene Holley said, "Senator, what do you need?" I said, "Gene, excuse me just a minute. Let me run to the men's room and I'll be right back." So I went to the phone and I

called Urban League and asked for Clarence Cook who headed the Urban League. I said, "Clarence, I have an opportunity to get some Federal funds, but I need a program. Do you have one?" He said, "Yes." He said, "We need money to help blacks learn to take the Merit Exam." And I said, "How much do you need for that?" He said, "Well, we need at least \$50,000 as a start-up for that program." I said, "Okay, let me get back to you." So I hung the phone up and ran back into the room. And so, they were going around the room and when I came back Gene Holley said, "Senator." He said, "What do you need?" I said, "Gene, I need \$75,000 for a program to teach Georgians how to take the Merit Exam." He said, "Okay." And he marked that \$75,000 for Senator Johnson, just like that!

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: And he said at the end of the meeting, "Now, we're going back to the meeting when the session opens – after lunch we're going back to the meeting and I want you to swear in blood that what we did here will be your vote on the floor." And everybody said, "Okay." I was amazed. Because this was my first knowledge of the intersection – of what's really going on. That was politics at it's highest and best!

SHORT: *Laughter*

JOHNSON: I thought that I was a part of it, you know, sitting on the floor voting, that you vote

for the budget. They went back downstairs and when the question came up about the budget they let you argue what you want to argue -- for or against it -- and everything they agreed on upstairs they all voted on in that meeting downstairs. It was, at that time, that I knew that I was a part of the inner sanctum, that I had been really accepted. I thought I had before then, but when Gene Holley invited me to that meeting upstairs and they portioned out what part of the budget that each Senator wanted for his district, you know, I knew then that I had been -- I'd been accepted as a Senator.

SHORT: One of the boys.

JOHNSON: One of the boys.

SHORT: Good. That's great. Senator, as Georgia's first black Senator was there pressure on you from Civil Rights groups to speed up racial integration?

JOHNSON: Well, let me say that that was an expectation on the part of blacks generally, because I had been elected and I was the first to be elected. There was the expectation that I could do something about the problem. The expectation probably was all blown out of proportion. I'm one person and I could do but so much, but they expected me to do a great deal. I realized that. And so, I tried to do -- that's why I moved immediately to try to -- and did -- desegregate the State Capitol and to get black people involved in areas where they were not

involved before.

But as it relates to the Civil Rights Movement, it just so happens that Martin Luther King, Jr. finished at Booker T. Washington High School in '44, I finished Booker T. Washington High School in '45. Martin Luther King, Jr. was entered into Morehouse and graduated in the class of 1948. I entered Morehouse and graduated in the class of 1949. I knew Martin at Morehouse. In 1948 Martin Luther King, Jr. was a – went to the National – NAACP Convention as a delegate. I went to the convention as an alternate delegate. So, we knew each other Morehouse. And at Morehouse he was an ordinary fellow and one would never have known or thought then that he would become such an extraordinary fellow to change the face of America later on. So I had this relationship with him prior to the time that he became the Martin that the world now knows. And there was no pressure. I always assisted, did what I could to assist him in every way, and appeared on programs where he appeared and at meetings. I was in Durham, North Carolina on one occasion and he was there and I would ride over and we had this relationship. So, I had no problems with that. Julian Bond, who was – later came to the Senate -- came to the Senate at the time that I was in the Senate and he became a very strong leader in the Civil Rights Movement, but our relationship was such that he would call me if he wanted me to do something, I would do it, but there was no pressure that was put on me. And that was probably the finest relationship that I've had with both Martin and with Julian in that regard.

SHORT: Senator, one final question, if I may. How would you like to be remembered?

JOHNSON: Well, I suspect that I would want to be remembered as one in a very difficult moment in history, who sought to prove that given an opportunity a black man can be just as effective legislator as a white man. And I wanted to show or to prove that given that opportunity that the ceiling would not fall in and the chairs would not disintegrate. And that if they had an opportunity to witness me, to view me as an individual and as a person, that that would probably change the course of relationships.

So, if I had to be remembered in any way it is that I wanted an opportunity – I wanted to be remembered as one who took a – went into the Senate of Georgia at the time when there was thought that a black man represented everything that was evil and everything that was not good, and I had an opportunity to go into the Senate and change that impression to show them that relationships are not based on color, but it's based on what's in one's heart. You know, and I feel very strongly about that. And people like Hugh Gillis, who was not accustomed to treating black people as equals, became my friend. And people who had no concept of a black man being able to stand up in the well of the Senate and talk about Aristotle and Plato and Socrates had no idea that this – that knowledge can come from a black as well as a white, and when they got that notion -- that idea -- then they felt comfortable in saying, "All right, we can proceed together, we can walk together along the – life's highway." And that's how I'd like to be remembered, as one who opened the door when the doors were thought to be permanently closed and created and developed friendship and was able to forge, I think, progress, which, I think, has some significance between blacks and whites today.

SHORT: Thank you, Senator, you've been a great Georgian and we appreciate what you've done.

JOHNSON: Thank you. It was my pleasure. It's my pleasure. It was my pleasure when I first got the call from you. I said, "My, this is really great."

[END]

**University of Georgia
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