

Johnny Isakson interviewed by Bob Short
2007 April 4
Atlanta, GA
Reflections on Georgia Politics
ROGP-018
Original: video, 48 minutes

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DOCPROPERTY "reference" Reflections on Georgia Politics
Johnny Isakson

Date of Transcription: DOCPROPERTY "date" June 24, 2009

BOB SHORT: We have as our guest today Senator Johnny Isakson, an old friend who has been down in his first term in the United States Senate. Senator Isakson, one of the goals we have for our program is to reflect upon Georgia politics and particularly on the lives of those

who are our guests. So my first question is always this: Who is Johnny Isakson?

JOHNNY ISAKSON: Well, you want me to start at the beginning?

SHORT: In the very beginning.

ISAKSON: Well, I'm a rare breed. I'm a native Georgian. There are not that many of us any more, but I was born here right at the end of World War II to a great mom and dad. In fact, I guess my political interest grew out of my father's deep support of Herman Talmadge. And I still remember in my early years doing fish fries at the Atlanta Waterworks for Herman Talmadge, and my dad was one of the principal sponsors of that. I'd do cleaning up and I'd put up directional signs and all the other typical type stuff. So I grew up in a family that was not political as in being elected officials, but were very engaged in the political process.

Went to the University of Georgia, and my best friends became Pierre Howard and Alex Crumbley. Pierre later became Lieutenant Governor of Georgia. Alex Crumbley later a distinguished state senator and then a Superior Court judge and then candidate for the Supreme Court, although he lost that election. And the three of us, almost every weeknight after studying or partying - - a little of both - - would go to the Quito America Motel and eat pecan pie and drink coffee and talk about politics. And, of course, John Kennedy had energized us. He was the President in those early '60s years, and he was young, energetic. I've always told people that the presidents I admired most were John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, and if you study the two,

although from different parties, one a Democrat and one a Republican, they had exactly the same agenda. They both cut taxes. They both were hawks on defense. The President took on the Cubans and Reagan took on the Russians. And then they both were strong on economic development, and both of them could do what is essential for a great politician to be able to do. They could stand up in front of a group of people who totally disagreed with them and make a speech, and by the time it was over, they'd have everybody in the room on their feet clapping. They could move folks.

So as it happened, after Diane and I married in 1968, in 1972 I got involved in some local community affairs. The next thing I know, in 1974 some people convinced me to run as a Republican for the County Commission in Cobb County. There were only two Republicans in Cobb County at that time, at least two in elected office and weren't but two or three more who'd admit to being one, to tell you the truth. Most everybody was Democrat, and I ran a race and lost, but it was a very close race. And two years later, everybody said, "Well, Johnny, you ought to run one more time. Don't waste the name recognition you've built up." So I got permission from Diane, because it needs to be a partnership when you do something like political service and public service, and I ran for the legislature in 1976, and I was the only Republican in Georgia to defeat a Democratic incumbent for any office. That's not as big an achievement as it sounds. There weren't a whole lot running, but on top of that, Jimmy Carter ran and swept the state when he was elected President, so it was sort of unusual for a Republican to win.

Six years later, I ran for Minority Leader when Herb Jones retired and was elected Republican leader. We had grown from 19 to 23 in 1983, and then I left the - - I didn't retire, but I ran for

governor in 1990 after Joe Frank Harris's term was up. Ran in the Republican primary, had three opponents - - Zell Miller, Roy Barnes, and Andy Young ran in the Democrat primary. And as fate would have it, I won the Republican primary. Zell Miller won the Democratic primary, and then I got a great lesson in political humility. And it was a good race, and it was close. It gets closer every year it goes by, and I tell my grandchildren about it, but still, the results were the same.

And out of the race, two great things happened. One is that I made a friend for life in Zell Miller and gained a lot of respect for him. And secondly, I realized that I still had an interest in public life, so I went back to the - - in '92, they created a new senate seat after reapportionment of the State Senate. I'd served 14 years in the House, so I ran for the Senate and was elected. Sam Nunn three years later announced his retirement from the Senate, and I said, well, I've got one more statewide race in me. I ran in the Republican primary and lost in a runoff and pretty much figured I was through with public service. I had a real estate company. We were successful, and I was enjoying running it.

And about two months after I lost that runoff, Governor Miller called me. And he said, "I just fired the State Board of Education, and I want to make you the chairman, and you come down here and fix this mess." I thought it was trick. I mean, here's a guy that beat me and now he wants me to come down and - - so I thought about it all weekend long, and I called him back and said, "Governor, I really appreciate it, but I don't think..." He said, "If you're going to tell me no, come over to the mansion and tell me to my face." So I got in the car and drove over there, and he opened the door, and Shirley and I and he went in that little library right off to the right of

the front entry. And he said, "Now why are you going to tell me no?" And I said, "Well, you know, Governor, there are 11 members of the Board. Two of them are refusing to resign. There are nine openings. I'd only be one person. Six is a majority. I couldn't do anything." He said, "You tell me the other ones to appoint." And we sat there in the man - - we then went upstairs and we started - - I'd say, "Well, what about Larry Thompson?" He said, "Larry's a good man." He's now the head attorney for PepsiCo. We got Larry. He was on trial in Detroit. The governor tracked him down - - his operator did - - got him on the phone and said, "I want you to do it." Ed Andrews from DeKalb County, E.G. Maybaum [ph] from Augusta, and before 2:00 in the afternoon, we had a new State Board of Education. And Zell called the press over and we had a press conference, and the next thing I knew, I was back in public life.

And I was very fortunate to be able to do that. In 1998, Newt Gingrich decided to resign as Speaker of the House and congressman from Georgia. A lot of my friends encouraged me to do that, and I said, well, I'm 55; I might not get another chance like this; I'll run. So I did and was elected and enjoyed myself. And then lo and behold, Paul Coverdell passed away. Governor Miller was appointed to fill his unexpired term. After being reelected, Governor Miller decided after a couple years to retire, and I ran one more time and won statewide and replaced him, and I'm in the Senate today. So I guess I've been a very fortunate two-time loser.

SHORT: You became a senator during a very critical time. We have the war around the world on terrorism. We have a lot of problems at home. What should we do about this terrorism business?

ISAKSON: Well, if you don't confront it, it will consume you and it will defeat you. The biggest enemy to terrorism are the Bill of Rights and the Constitution of the United States of America. I tell people, you know, it's the First Amendment, the right to speak out that fundamentalists hate. The right to bear arms, they don't want you to be able to defend yourself. The right to worship as you choose. They want you to worship one way and one religion and one factor the way he wants. You go through the Bill of Rights or the Constitution of the United States of America and you'll find that radical Islamic terrorists or terrorism in general is the antithesis of everything that the first 10 amendments to the Constitution stand for. And if America doesn't fight to defend that, then there will be no America.

And so I've said in speeches on the floor of the Senate, I'm now 62 years old. The rest of my life is about my grandchildren and my children, and I want them to grow up in a world and a country that is as prosperous and as safe as America was when the years that I grew up. And the only - - and the - - you know, we live on the shoulders of those who fought Nazis and defeated them in World War II. We live on the shoulders of the brave men and women of the Cold War who finally brought the Berlin Wall down. And today - - first it was fascism, then it was the Berlin Wall. Now it's terrorism. It's this generation's call to action, and we have to defeat it or else everything that we love and cherish will quickly go away.

SHORT: I don't want to get too far off the subject, but I would like for you, if you will, to tell us about your children and grandchildren.

ISAKSON: Well, I'm - - first of all, I want to tell you about my wife, without whom there wouldn't be any of the other. I was real fortunate; I met Diane in 1967, and we dated about six or seven months and I asked her to marry me. And seven months later, I married her the weekend after she graduated from Georgia. She's a wonderful lady. We've been married 39 years this June. We have three great children, John, Julie, and Kevin. And we have six grandchildren and in 30 days our seventh will be born, so we're very fortunate. They all live in Georgia and all live really in the metropolitan Atlanta area. And there, I'm just very blessed, because anybody that's in public life for 30 years, which I now have been, doesn't do that without a supporting family and a loving wife.

SHORT: Getting back to Iraq, you have constantly supported the President's approach and his plans and his funding. There's a lot of opposition to that, as you know, around the country. Do you think there will be a time when we should really withdraw?

ISAKSON: Well, I am a consummate optimist, and when you're fighting to win, you don't contemplate withdrawal. And let me further answer the question by saying this. I'm on the Foreign Relations Committee. We had 28 hours of testimony earlier this year from 14 different experts about whether we should withdraw or whether we should surge. On the question of surging, there were differences of opinion. Some said you should; some said you shouldn't. But on the question of withdrawing, every expert said if the United States withdraws or redeploys,

there will be hundreds of thousands of innocent deaths, if not millions, and the world will become unstable. So if that's the result of a withdrawal, given the sectarian violence in the region, then we must stay the course. And we also must be victorious, and I think we are this close. Now how much that is, it's two inches on this camera, but it could be a chasm in reality, but the fact of the matter is, we're seeing some signs of improvement in Baghdad. We've seen significant improvement in Anbar province. The mullahs have turned on Al Qaeda and the terrorists in Anbar province. The assembly is about to contemplate a hydrocarbon transaction, and Iraq will become the first nation in the Middle East that is oil rich that will actually be sharing its wealth with its people, and that will go a long way toward making people think twice about sectarian violence. And in the end, it's important that we leave the governance - - the security of Iraq to the Iraqi people. And we're close to having the Iraqi military at a state where hopefully they can do that.

But these are difficult times. I was alive in World War II, but I was an infant, but there were times in World War II that were very difficult. I've read some of Churchill's speeches recently in the darkest days of the Blitzkrieg in England. But people that were as strong-willed and passionate as he was, who didn't go the route of Neville Chamberlain were ultimately the reason that England survived, and ultimately our coalition allied powers won. We hopefully will accomplish the same thing in the war in Iraq, which is really a second battle in the ultimate war on terrorism.

SHORT: What's the third battle?

ISAKSON: That's going to - - the third battle could be in the United States of America if we were to withdraw. I mean, there is great evidence that the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 would still be here attacking us again if they hadn't gone back to the Middle East to fight us there. If you go to Guantanamo Bay, which I have been to, we have prisoners in Guantanamo Bay--enemy detainees and combatants in Guantanamo Bay--that we have released and caught them again on the battlefield in Iraq and brought them back. And these are Al Qaeda based terrorists that are out to force that radical agenda, so that's as evidence as I can - - good evidence as I can possibly find to realize the ultimate danger if we withdraw is we invite them to come back to attack us here.

SHORT: How about Iran?

ISAKSON: Iran is a huge problem. They are isolating themselves. The Russians recently stopped their support, ostensibly, they said, because of a nonpayment by Iraq on some of their nuclear stuff, but in fact, Russia is getting worried too. Hopefully France, which has been an enabler for Iraq, will back away - - enabler for Iran, I'm sorry, will back away. Ahmadinejad is a very dangerous person. He was one of the people that captured the American Embassy folks and held them hostage for 444 days. He is a - - believes in the 12th Imam and a radical sect of the Shia side of the fundamental Islamic movement who believes that only out of Armageddon does the 12th Imam come back, and feels like - - and he said this - - that it's part of his goal to cause

that to happen.

As always, America has tried to be a diplomatic and approach reasonable cool heads, sitting down and working this out. But the only way cool heads sit down and work things out is when they know the alternative that is facing the consequences of having to deal with the United States of America in a hostile environment. The stronger we remain as a military country and in our technology, the more, ultimately, these rogue nations will come to the table and negotiate. As evidenced North Korea's recent agreement, albeit how trustworthy they may or may not be, the fact that six major powers - - five in addition to us - - forced them to sit down at the table, and they had to deal with the neighbors in the region. And they backed down from some of the hostile rhetoric they were previously saying.

SHORT: The part of our program at Young Harris College is a continuing learning system program. And we encourage those students who are elderly, or more mature, I guess, is the word, to ask questions. So I bring to you two questions - -

ISAKSON: Okay.

SHORT: - - of those people who are concerned, first of all, about social security.

ISAKSON: Well, I'm one of their contemporaries, and I'm concerned about it too. Social - - if you read - - this last October, if you have paid into social security, you get a letter every year

from the Social Security Administration. It's a six-page letter. The upper right-hand corner, there's a message from the commissioners of social security. And three years ago, they said social security was broke in 2047. Two years ago, they said 2045. Last year, they said 2043. Social security is becoming a financial liability, and there will be a point in time in two or three decades where it goes negative.

The President has made a very positive proposal that was shot down, and it was a proposal, really, that said, okay, let's allow younger social security payees the option of self-directing a portion of their payroll tax to a regulated IRA or investment vehicle, and then cap their benefit while guaranteeing the protection of the benefit for those that either don't elect to do it or are over the age of 55. What the President was attempting to do was take the magic of the time value of money and put it to work while at the same time creating a mechanism for people to, on their own, cap their benefit rather than the government doing it for them.

There will be a time - - it'll be after George Bush is President of the United States - - but there will be a time where that concept will be a part of the solution to the problem, and we've got a decade for that type of thing to work. Once we go too much further, we lose the miracle of compounding interest and the time value of money. But it is - - we suffer from a good problem.

When Roosevelt created social security, one in 15 Americans lived to the age of 65. Now almost every American does. They didn't have social security. It wasn't that big a liability to the country because most everybody never lived to collect it. Now, of course, the average age of a woman born in the United States is going to be over 80 years. Average age of a man is going to be over 80 years. People are going to be collecting for 15 or 20 years. My father-in-law is 92.

You know, so a system that was based on actuarial numbers predicated on life expectancy of 64, now you have to do it on life expectancy of 84. And we've got to modernize it and tweak it. I just hope we do it sooner rather than later, and I've been rather outspoken about that.

SHORT: Health care.

ISAKSON: Simply put and the short answer: We have three decisions, three areas that we've got to make decisions in. First is what the government and Medicare will pay for in the last 60 days of life, which is where 80 percent of the cost of health care goes. I have proposed that anybody signing up for Medicare must execute a living will or a durable power of attorney before they're eligible, so we can get people while they are of sound mind and body directing those that will provide health care to them what they do want done and don't want done. If you don't, because of our laws, as they should be, doctors can keep people alive for a long time although they are in a state that had they had the chance, they would not have wanted to stay alive on a life support system or something like that. The cost of that in the system is tremendous. That's one thing.

Second thing, we have to ask ourselves this question: Is it fair or right to ask the American taxpayers to pay for a hip transplant for Johnny Isakson when he's 92? If Johnny Isakson can pay for it, probably he ought to do that, because that's not an essential element of health care. And that speaks to the means testing question.

And then third, we need to focus on wellness and disease management and the accountability of

our own selves. IBM, Matria, a number of companies through disease management programs and wellness have reduced their cost of health care, improved the quality of life of their people, and lessened the more expensive treatments. If you do what you should with hypertension, you can avoid having a transplant of a heart. If you're a diabetic and you do your regimen of pharmaceuticals and therapy, you can avoid blindness or an amputation. We've got to get serious about holding ourselves accountable, so the quality of our life is better and the cost of that quality of life is less on the back of the taxpayers.

SHORT: You've brought forth some tax proposals that have piqued the interest of a lot of Americans. Would you tell us a little bit about those?

ISAKSON: Well, I think our tax system is a Christmas tree that's over-decorated and lopsided. And politicians, of which I am one, have for the better part of the last three decades tweaked the system, and now it's all out of whack. The alternative minimum tax was developed to see to it that 19 people in 1968 who paid no taxes on a million dollars in income had to pay some tax. But because of the way it was written, it didn't contemplate the future. It didn't adjust it for inflation, and now a family of four making \$50,000 who own their own house have to pay an alternative minimum tax over and above what the tax formula says. That's not right.

So what I've proposed is that we terminate the tax code at a date in the future - - July 4, 2010 or December 31, 2010 - - and then create a commission not of politicians but of good, sound economists and business people to recommend a tax code that's right for the 21st century. And

then force the Congress, before the end of 2010, to either ratify the new tax code or say, no, we like what we've got. And I guarantee you'd have a new tax code because nobody would vote for what we've got. And we're not - - we are hurting ourselves competitively. Taxes are higher for business and production in the United States than they are offshore. And there are a lot of countries that use their tax system to attract away American business because we remain in this rigid trance or rigid gridlock in terms of our tax system.

I think we need a fairer system. I think we need a more equitable system. And I think we need a participatory system. We have far too few people paying the bulk of the tax load via the income tax, and everybody performs better when they have a little bit of equity in the game. So I think we need a fairer and a flatter system of taxation if you're going to use percentages, and I think we need to make sure that we don't tax productivity into a state of motivating people to be nonproductive, and we run the risk of doing that with the tax system we have today.

SHORT: Well, we often hear the term fair tax. Do you support that concept?

ISAKSON: That's the consumption tax. That's the tax that repeals the estate tax, the payroll tax, and the income tax and replaces it with a sales tax on goods and on services of 23 percent or some percentage, and then contemplates the embedded taxes currently or the income tax system comes out of the cost of goods and services. Consumption taxes are by far the most popular tax. In the state of Georgia in the last 15 years, every county in this state has ratified a one percent sales tax increase for schools or for capital improvements. People like that because everybody

pays, because it doesn't sound like a lot because it's a penny.

SHORT: That's right.

ISAKSON: You know, one percent sounds a lot better than 30 or something like that. That certainly is a way to go, as could be a flat income tax, as could be alternative mechanisms. But the current progressive system with the AMT on top of it is not in the best interests, long term, of the United States.

SHORT: Getting back to reflections, when you first went to the House of Representatives, as I recall you were the only Republican in the body.

ISAKSON: No, there were 19 of us.

SHORT: Nineteen?

ISAKSON: It just seemed like I was the only one. It was pretty lonely, but we were outnumbered 161 to 19.

SHORT: And who was speaker then?

ISAKSON: Tom Murphy.

SHORT: Tom Murphy. And you got along well with Tom Murphy.

ISAKSON: In fact, three weeks ago, I was in Bremen to speak to the Rotary Club, and I called his son, Judge Mike Murphy, and I said, "Judge, I'm going to be in Bremen and I want to take an hour, and if the Speaker would see me, I'd like to come see him." He's not able to communicate and he's in - - he suffers from the debilitating effects of a stroke, but I spent 30 minutes holding his hand and he would answer by squeezing my hand. And shared with him how much I - - as painful as the lessons were that he taught me, how much I have benefitted from learning from his style of leadership and equally his compassion for the whole state. I mean, he was a rural speaker, came from a rural area, but probably if it weren't for him, you wouldn't have the World Congress Center, you wouldn't have MARTA, you wouldn't have a lot of the infrastructure that's made Atlanta the economic capital of the southeastern United States. So he and I had our fights. We were of different parties, and he hated Republicans. I don't hate anybody. But we always had a mutual respect and I appreciate what I learned from him so much, and I'm glad I get to see him every once in a while so I can tell him.

SHORT: What was your reaction to the most recent election - - national election?

ISAKSON: Well, any time you lose as a party, you're disappointed. I'm not so sure it wasn't a

loss that we contributed greatly to. I think we lost - - we being Republicans. You know, when you take - - when you're at war, you first of all have less than a positive climate to run, and when you add on to that some of the other issues, some of the spending ran away with in Washington made folks mad. You add that to the war and other things, and the Democrats seized and took advantage of it. But, you know, I tell everybody, Bob, the one great thing about our politic system is it's competitive, and you don't win something and keep it unless you're responding to the people, and if we do a good job at coming back, we'll be back.

SHORT: There was an interesting poll that I recently ran across about that election that involved senior citizens. And I've got it here somewhere, I think, if I went through here, and I would like to get your reaction to that. The American Association of Retired People, of course, is a great big organization that represents us had a poll - - published a poll that said 52 percent of the voters in the most recent national election were citizens over 55. They said that 55 percent of those voters voted for Democrats, 41 percent voted for Republicans. My own experience has been that senior citizens are a bit more conservative. Do you think that there was a trend there, or do you think it was just a reaction to the present situation?

ISAKSON: My guess - - and I emphasize the word guess - - would be it was somewhat a reaction to the current situation. And when you define current situation, I think you define current situation as the fact that social security had been a big debate two years ago. We were at war and still are at war. Spending had gotten out of hand. And you throw those three

ingredients in the mix and I think they could contribute to seniors voting that way.

There are a few other factors about seniors. Seniors are the most reliable voters. They will almost always be the - - will always be the largest number to turn out. I don't know the validity of the poll. I know I do very well when they break down the exit polling with senior voters.

And quite frankly, what President Bush brought forward in Medicare Part D has turned out to be one of the most popular things in the world and was the most unpopular thing when it was introduced. But it has worked, and it's worked well, and I think that will earn back a lot of the senior support. But once again, as long as you're at war, you have an instability in the electorate. You add to that a factor like spending and the deficit, which they look at as a negative for social security, then you get some undermining of that vote.

SHORT: Back to reflections. You served in the Senate for a while, and with Lieutenant Governor Miller, and y'all became very close friends. And Governor Miller has shown in the past few years that he became a very nonpartisan person. And in talking with people around the state, they look upon you as a very nonpartisan person. Is that a good assessment?

ISAKSON: I think it's fair. Let me correct one thing. I served in the House for 14 of the 16 years that Zell was the Lieutenant Governor. Then he beat me for governor, so I was in the State Senate - -

SHORT: Oh, you were, yeah.

ISAKSON: - - when he was governor, not lieutenant governor.

SHORT: Oh, okay. I'm sorry.

ISAKSON: But, you know, when I got to the State Legislature, and I was the 19th Republican and there were 161 Democrats, I knew we weren't going to do - - be able to do anything unless we found a way to find common ground, and you don't find common ground by throwing bombs at folks. And so I tried to work with Democrats to get those things that we wanted to get done done, tried to work with it. And I'll tell you one little story, since you brought that up.

I think that's the right philosophy, and I've spent my entire career trying to make common ground with people and crossing bridges and not burning them. And there's a little project called Brasstown Valley in north Georgia, which is right down the road from where Governor Miller lives today and was born. It was a project that was done at the end of his administration and a project that meant a lot to him. And I was still an outnumbered Republican, and had fought hard for privatization. I thought the government ought to always see if the private sector could do something before it just hauled off and did it. The governor wanted to do Brasstown Valley.

There was some controversy about whether the government ought to do it. And Joe Tanner was the head of DNR, and Joe Tanner came to me and said, "Johnny, I think" - - I had a privatization bill to study to see if the private sector could do it. He said, "Johnny, would you allow us to merge that with the Brasstown Valley bill, and let's let that be the first test?" Well, I thought I'd

died and gone to heaven. I mean, Republicans just didn't pass things then, so I said absolutely, and went to the well and spoke in favor of it. And we passed that bill, which amended the DNR's authorizing a bill and affected Stone Mountain, Lanier, Lake Lanier Islands, and future projects. And I am pleased to tell you that when they did the feasibility study on Brasstown, they found out, yes, the private sector could do this. They put it out for competitive bid, and Dick Stormont, who is a Marriott operator, won the bid, did Brasstown Valley, and sends the state a check every month, and it's the private sector with private sector employees paying income taxes to the state, the same thing. And, of course, recently the leases at Lanier Islands have been transferred under the same type of concept.

I think that story's a good example of how if you don't let partisanship get in your way, then good ideas, regardless of source, can end up making good things happen. And to this day, that's still one of the things I look back on the most as appreciating the most that I had the chance to do.

SHORT: Were you surprised when the Republicans won the governor's office?

ISAKSON: Well, I thought 1990 we could do it. That's why I ran. So, I mean, to say I was surprised 20 - - or 12 years later would be not a fair statement to make. I knew we could. I thought - - Roy Barnes is a dear friend of mine. We've raised our families in the same community. He was a strong governor, but I think that race was a race where the Democrats thought they couldn't lose it, and the Republicans thought they might could win it. And what

ended up happening is that Sonny Perdue ran a good campaign - - a great campaign. I think the Democrats realized they were in trouble too late, and that's why it was such a great victory, and Sonny has done a great job.

But no, I wasn't surprised. I didn't think it was a sure thing that we'd win, and I didn't - - in fact, I wouldn't have bet money that we would have won, but I knew we could. We could have won in - - I thought we could have won in 1990, and maybe if we'd had a better candidate than me, we might have won in 1990. But the fact of the matter is the state had been turning for the better part of three decades, and now we have a competitive two-party state that no party can get complacent in the governor's office or in federal office, for that matter.

SHORT: How about the General Assembly?

ISAKSON: I was a little bit surprised that the sea change took place so fast once it did. But if you back away, once a Republican governor was elected, that changed a lot of the thought process. And I have to say this, talking about recording things for posterity: I hope some historian writes this. There's going to be a guy who's going to get very little credit but deserves a lot, and his name is Eric Johnson. Because when we won the Senate - - we hadn't won the House; we won the Senate - - Eric Johnson was the minority leader so he became the majority leader. That could've gone one of two ways. We could have gotten overconfident and overjoyous that we won, overreached, and gotten beat two years later. But Eric Johnson did one of the finest jobs of organizing a minority that became a majority into a working party. He

worked closely with the Democrats on the other side and Terry Coleman, who was the Speaker at the time in a Democratic majority House. I think Eric's ability to do that allowed the House two years later to take over - - Republicans to take over the House. And I don't know what's in his future, but I think Eric Johnson of Savannah should be looked upon as one of the key reasons why once we got our foothold in, we took that other step two years later, because he was mature beyond his years and insightful beyond his years, and never relished in the victory.

SHORT: Going back to 1964 when Bo Callaway was elected to Congress, and from that point on, it seems that there was a slow movement toward the Republican Party in the state of Georgia. To what do you attribute that?

ISAKSON: There was always one of us that was willing to stick our neck out, like the old proverbial chicken on Thanksgiving morning in the barnyard. Bo did it in that famous race with Ellis Arnold and Lester Maddox and won the popular vote but lost in the Legislature. And then just a few years later, four or six, Hal Suit, who was a TV personality in Atlanta and very popular, decided to run for governor, and in that period of time, intervening time, Fletcher Thompson and Ben Blackburn had been elected to Congress. And then, unfortunately, they lost a few years later. Hal Suit lost.

Then we had a real lull in the mid '70s because Jimmy Carter ran for President of the United States and won. Anytime you have a favorite son, that will skew everything. But the Reagan election reenergized Republicans. Mack Mattingly defeated Herman Tallmadge in what is truly

the upset of the history of elections in Georgia. And all of a sudden, Republicans got hope. In '76, I was elected in '76 to the Legislature. Then Newt Gingrich was elected to Congress in '78. And then in 1982, Bob Bell, a state senator, ran for governor against Joe Frank Harris, and Bob was a very credible individual and ran a great race. He lost, but that empowered Republicans. And then in 1990, I stuck my neck out and said, well, I think now is the time that a Republican can win and - -

SHORT: And almost did.

ISAKSON: And almost did, but didn't. And almost only counts in horseshoes, so. But then in the '90s, a lot of things came together. The progress of those losses had generated for us a bench. More and more Republicans had gotten involved and gotten engaged. Take Saxby Chambliss. He was one of my best friends in college. When I ran for governor, I got him to support me. He had never been involved in politics. He did support me and stuck his neck out, and four years later ran for Congress and was elected in the revolutionary year of 1994. So a lot of people came out of that, so all of a sudden, the Republicans were building a bench from which they could draw people who would run for higher office. If anything, right now, there has been a role reversal with Republicans and Democrats. We have a pretty deep bench now and the Democrats, through this process, didn't build a bench, and they're a little lighter on the bench like we used to be. But that - - that is a temporary condition.

SHORT: You're on the Transportation Committee. What can you do to ease the traffic around here?

ISAKSON: Stay here in my office and not drive on the street. We've got a serious problem in the state. We've got a serious problem in the country. Talking about taxes for a second; we'll go back. We have a broken mechanism. Think about this, Bob. We have unbridled growth. Georgia is almost 10 million people. Atlanta is five million people. We are developing ethanol, renewable sources of energy, hybrid cars, which means our gas mileage is doubling. I drive a hybrid car and that gets 30 miles to the gallon. I used to drive one that got 15. Our tax system for motor fuels is 7-1/2 cents per gallon - - not percent but cents. So if you double your mileage and your tax mechanism is not a percentage but it's a fixed amount per gallon of consumption, then you're losing 50 percent of your revenue. Now 4 cents of our gas tax is a sales tax, and it is a percentage. But what has happened is petroleum now has gone to \$70 a barrel. I think it was \$62 on the stock market this morning. The cost of building roads has almost gone up 60 percent, because roads are mostly - - the biggest component part of road is petroleum. You have to drive the concrete and the asphalt out there in a truck that's run on oil, and asphalt is predominately oil. [Coughs] Pardon me; I'm sorry.

So we've got to look at alternative sources of revenues to meet our demands in the future. In the urban areas, that means things like hot lanes. That means things like toll roads where there are improvements where people can elect to use the toll because it's faster and quicker. Privatization has worked in Indiana where roads have been privatized, and the private sector has paid big

money to buy a road, maintain it, and toll it over time - - treat it as an annuity almost. And then we have to look at the mechanism of collection, how we collect the revenue and how is the best way to bring it in.

Roads - - transportation - - is best financed by the users paying. That's fair. Airlines, for example, when you buy a plane ticket at Hartsfield and you fly to New York and back, you pay a \$7.50 passenger facility charge on your trip up. You pay \$7.50 back. That's \$15. You take the 90 million people a year that leave Atlanta and multiply that - - in Hartsfield - - and multiply that times \$7.50. That is a lot of money. And that's why you have five runways there now. That's why you're getting ready to see the midfield terminal, and you see all the improvements. And the people that are benefitting from those improvements are the people that also financed it. That's why rail is broken. Rail is subsidized by taxpayers, not subsidized by - - not paid for by riders, and that's why that system is broken, has difficulty. But the aviation model and the surface transportation model are the best models for transportation, and the mechanism is the fairest.

SHORT: State legislator, chairman of the Education Committee, candidate for governor, candidate for United States Senate - - what has been the highest moment in your political career?

ISAKSON: Whoa. I guess I'm - - the highest? Hm. Well, the moment that I appreciate the most was when Governor Miller asked me to come down and be chairman of the Board of Education, because I owe the rest of my political career, which has been very successful, to the

fact that he gave a two-time loser a second chance, and I'll never forget that. From things that I have done, I'm proudest that I lost twice and found a way to come back and didn't let a defeat get me down.

In terms of the jobs I've had, I've served in every legislative body I could be elected to, which very few people have ever had the honor of doing that. And I appreciate - - each job has been rewarding, and each one has been different, and I'm just glad I've lived long enough to be able to have that experience and hope I can do a good enough job to pay the people of Georgia back for the confidence they've placed in me.

SHORT: All of that while running a very successful business.

ISAKSON: Well, I had a lot of people. I got a lot of credit. I did the best I could to lead them, but I had the best - - we had about 1,000 agents and 200 employees in Northside Realty and sold about 11,000 houses a year. And, I mean, that's a labor-intensive business and your assets all have two legs. They could walk and go next door tomorrow, and mine never did. And we never took our eye off the ball, and I'll always be grateful for their support, because I could not have done what I've done politically without them being understanding to allow me unselfishly the time away to pursue those political ambitions, too.

SHORT: Your lowest moment?

ISAKSON: You know, obviously, when you lose.

SHORT: Not fun. I've done that.

ISAKSON: No, it's not, but it's a moment. You know, I don't spend five seconds thinking about how I felt in the three times I lost, but I could talk all day long about things like Brasstown Valley and things I've been a part of that were a success. And I think that, in the end, is the best advice I can give young people. Success, to me, is a series of failures bound together by positive attitude that results in an ultimate victory. And if you let one defeat get you down, you'll never get to the point in life that success can take you if you have a positive attitude.

SHORT: Senator, you've been very successful. You are a great United States Senator. I would not surprised - - be surprised-- to see you there for many, many more years, and we thank you very much for being with us today.

ISAKSON: Thank you, Bob. It's been a pleasure.

SHORT: Thank you.

ISAKSON: Thank you.

[END]

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