

BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short and this is "Reflections on Georgia Politics" sponsored by the Institute for Continuing Learning, Young Harris College, and the Russell Library at the University of Georgia. We are delighted today to have as our guest Tommy Irvin, Georgia's long-time Agriculture Commissioner, who I might say probably knows more about Georgia politics than anybody you'll ever meet. He has run for election and been elected ten consecutive times to an office that is statewide and attracts a lot of attention from potential candidates. So, Tommy, welcome to you. We're delighted to have you.

TOMMY IRVIN: Bob, it's a pleasure to be with you.

SHORT: Good.

IRVIN: Our association goes back for many, many years.

SHORT: It does.

IRVIN: And I always valued the friendship we've had and the time that we worked together. I think it's kind of one of the highlights of my early years in government. And I showed up on Capitol Hill and nobody knew who I was and I didn't know anybody either, so – but we'll talk a little bit about that later on...

SHORT: Good.

IRVIN: ...as we move into the program about some of the things that we were involved in together.

SHORT: Good. Mr. Commissioner, we're very interested now in you. If you will, tell us a little bit about yourself. And you grew up on a real mountain farm.

IRVIN: Well, I – my parents were what you call sharecroppers, you know. I think they used to call it “third and fourth.” Part of your production was to pay for the land that you cultivated. I was born in a little town called Lula, Georgia. It straddles both Hall and Banks County. I was born on the Hall County side, and then my family moved from there over into White County when I was still a young lad. And I still remember having to get up and hitch up the mules and plow the fields. And I used to tell folks that we grew a little cotton on the farm, but back then – you don't grow any cotton in that part of the state now – and the red clay would get hard and you had to be very careful that you didn't let the red clay uproot the young cotton as it emerged from the soil. And I'll always remember having to plow the field. When you were getting ready to lay your corn by, you always do what we call “bust the middles”.

I know when I was chosen as Commissioner of Agriculture, one of the editorial writers

for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution wanted to know what I knew about farming. I said, "Well, you know, I guess I knew everything that you needed to know. I knew how to tie a handspring and I knew gee and I knew haw and knew what that meant. And I knew how to keep the cow -- keep the horse from walking on the cotton when it was young and step on it. And I knew how to put on a set of Johnson wings." He said, "What's that?" I said, "Well, I thought that's where I'd lose you!"

Laughter

IRVIN: But that was part of the implements that you put on the plow stock so when you -- when you plow, you'd bust out the furrow with that Johnson wings. One of the things I used to do is take the plows and the Johnson wings and sweeps and things of that nature down to the blacksmith shop to sharpen them and see him heating, heat them up and beat them out, you know. And you couldn't afford to buy anything new back in those days because you didn't have any money, and most everything you did was bartering. And I knew when we would sell our cotton in the fall of the year, we would be going to town, into Cornelia, and you'd get you a new pair of overalls and a shirt, one pair of shoes, and if you wore them out before the winter was over, you'd have to put some paper or pasteboard in them to keep them -- your feet -- from intruding through the worn out shoes of that type during that day.

And it was quite an experience. I know when I first became Commissioner of

Agriculture -- making speeches down in the southern part of the state, it's entirely different from what we had in the northern part of Georgia. I'd have somebody who says, "Commissioner." He says, "How many bushels of corn did you get in those little bottom lands?" I said, "Bushels?" I said, "The people in north Georgia sold it by the gallon."

Laughter

IRVIN: That was a joke, of course. That was ethanol!

SHORT: It's also true.

IRVIN: We called it moonshine back then.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: The same probably would be called ethanol now. And it was quite an experience. I became very interested in community affairs. I know after Bernice and I met riding the school bus out to the old Southeastern Fair and I was telling the driver how to get there. You didn't have the expressways through Atlanta back in those days. And I'd been there before, and I kept noticing this young lady sitting back there with a young man in the back

of the bus. And it stopped at about Buford, and he went out to get a soft drink and he -- you know, he came back and I had his seat and he never did get it back.

Laughter

IRVIN: I told her I guess we fell in love at the first sight.

SHORT: At first sight, yeah.

IRVIN: But, you know, it's been a great union. We've been married more than 60 years now and this coming June '08 will be -- June 1 -- will be 61 years. And this day and time, that's quite a record.

SHORT: Yes, it is.

IRVIN: But my daddy was a sawmiller, and he got killed working at the sawmill. And I remember during World War II, I was not old enough to be drafted and in the summertime I would help up there at the sawmill. I'd tell them I knew the difference between the slabs and strips and the difference between lumber and waste. And it just gave me a lot of great training. My dad was very close to me; he was my buddy. You know, most young people, they cling to

their mother. My mother was a very delightful person and a great cook and a hard worker, and she was a Hogan. And a Hogan -- her father, my grandfather, was a Congregational Holiness. I know he used to sit in the choir and never sang a note, but he clapped -- stayed right in tune with the music.

But my wife influenced me to go to church and I was saved at Antioch Baptist Church where I belong now. And all of our children came along and accepted the Lord and savior Jesus Christ as their personal savior at that church. They don't all live in that community now so they belong to different churches, but some of them still do. And we have 14 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, eight grandsons and six granddaughters.

But I got interested in community affairs. My first public service was the Board of Trustees of Hazel Grove Elementary School where my sons, James and Johnny and David, all attended and LaVonda and Lisa all attended at elementary school. Later, I became a trustee of what was back then called North Habersham in Clarkesville, Georgia. And I was selected and elected by the grand jury to serve on the Board of Education, and that really got me involved in public service in a very visible way. I guess everything I ever did I tried to get in it where I could be and show some degree of hopefully persuasion. You call it leadership today, you know.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: And I served later as – in Lyons – and served as State President of the Georgia School Board Association. But my interest in Atlanta was because I felt that our local Representative was not representing us properly. And I joined with a carload of people going down to the Capitol and trying to persuade him to allow us to have a referendum on a piece of legislation dealing with how we change our local government. And, for some reason, he didn't feel like he wanted to accommodate us, and I could tell that made a lot of people very upset at him. And he went ahead and passed the bill without a referendum. I hadn't given any thought about running for the legislature at that time, but I was – we had cows on the farm. Would you like to take a break and ask some questions, Bob?

SHORT: No, I'm fine. No, you – no, you're doing well.

IRVIN: I thought if you did...

SHORT: No, sir.

IRVIN: We kept cows on our farm. Before I'd go off to the lumber mill, I would milk the cows early in the morning. And I remember one morning I heard some people coming down behind the house toward the barn and I could hear them and I recognized at least part of the voices, and he said, "We've come to see if we could convince you to run for the state

legislature.” And I said, “Well, I’m not sure I could run for the county line.” I’d never – I’d been on the school board and I’d been very active there, but I had not – it had not built a base broad enough to run in a countywide election. He came back the second morning with another group with him, the leader of the group, and came back the third morning. And at that one they got me to say I would look into it.

And I took a day off from work and, you know, traveled around through the county. And I had done a little singing and in most of the country churches, at one time or another, my wife and I had sang in them. After I accepted the Lord, we got into music. And I’d go knock on these doors and they’d say, “I know you. You sang in our church!” So I suppose that helped me a lot in my first election. And we had a very – another very prominent businessman running against the incumbent and I got more votes than both of them as a newcomer.

But that’s kind of how it started and I guess not too long after that’s when I – all in that period of time is when I met you.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: And we got involved in another very important endeavor.

SHORT: When you were – you got four terms in the legislature.

IRVIN: Four terms in the legislature and four terms on the school board. The school board terms were five years and the legislature, of course, was two years.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: And I was very happy to serve in the legislature. I had a local businessman, an attorney, had invited me to go into Atlanta and he said, "I want to introduce you to a man running for Governor." I said, "Who is it?" He said, "Lester Maddox." I said, "You know Lester Maddox?" He said, "Yes." He said, "You know, I moved up here to Habersham County from Atlanta." And he had supported him, I think, when he ran for Mayor of Atlanta. And he carried me down and we went into the old Henry Grady Hotel; back in that day, nearly everything close to that was where handled on Capitol Square. And I went with him and we went into the hotel there, and his daughter and his sister was all I could see was running his -- had his office open -- and said, "Wait around." They said, "He'll be back in a little while." And we sat around a while and, I don't know, kind of killed time until he came back in. And he came through there and hugged Jack Gunter, who later was our judge, you know, in this circuit up here -- the Mountain Circuit back when it was the Mountain Circuit. And he introduced me to Mr. Maddox, and we were sitting there talking and having lunch together and I suspect after about an hour of talking about everything we could think of on the agenda, he made the statement. He said, "I want you to manage my campaign." And I said, "Well --" I said, "I can't manage my

own. How could I manage yours?” “Well, I want you to do that.”

You know, an amazing thing about that, I did not give him a direct answer that day. He was anxious to get me that day to tell him whether I would help in his efforts to be Governor, but I put him off. I went around to see some of my prominent friends that had supported me for the legislature. By that time, I had more than one term, you know, already behind me. And they said, “Are you crazy? You want to get out and try to get that man elected Governor?” I had read a lot about him and I knew his image was not the best in the world. And, as you and I found out later, he was much different from what his image was. Great man. Very honest. But out of say 12 or 15 people I talked to, all of them but one called me back and said, “We reconsidered.” They said, “He might be Governor.” They said, “You ought to go help him.” And so I did and, as you know, we didn’t get elected. We didn’t get the most votes and ended up the legislature...

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: ...electing him. And I did whatever I could to make that happen and it’s the – all this was before I became Commissioner of Agriculture.

SHORT: Alright. There was a very historical thing that happened during that period when there was a – when Mr. Maddox – had not been elected but would be elected, and that was

legislative independence.

IRVIN: Well, that came out of that. That, I think -- let me just kind of fill in the gaps. You know I met you then and you became a part of his administration before I did, if I remember correctly.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: And he fired a young man he'd hired to be his -- I call it Chief of Staff or Executive Secretary, the man that ran his office. And he called me up and said, "You've got to -- you've got to come and run my office." He said, "You helped get me elected."

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: "Now you've got to help me be a decent Governor." And I resigned from the legislature and went down and I took over that office. In that you and I worked in unison there for, I guess, all the time I stayed as his Chief of Staff.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: You were a prominent member of the staff and you had one of the toughest jobs of all because you had to – you had to work on his image.

SHORT: I did, yeah. Yeah.

IRVIN: And I know you were his speech writer. I think I'm right on all this.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: If not, you can correct it. And you...

SHORT: I wrote some speeches.

IRVIN: And you would, along with others, help advise him. And if you could get him to calm down before he'd get excited, he made some very solid decisions and good decisions for his time. I know that one of the things that influenced me a lot -- I know how he really wanted to make things happen, he did away with the patronage system.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: We had up until that time, if you wanted a job with the state, you had to get permission from the Governor.

SHORT: Go see the Governor.

IRVIN: And he did away with that. And he did away with some other practices that cost a lot of taxpayers' money. He was a very, very, very strong conservative on how he spent your tax money. And we can't – can't get away from the fact that he was a segregationist but not a racist.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: He probably, with your help and my help and guiding him, appointed more blacks to boards and bureaus than every Governor prior to that time put together.

SHORT: I think he was the first.

IRVIN: Well, to some very important posts, he was the first.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: And he picked good, solid people and they made him – they made him become a very moderate Governor on social events.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: And he's the only Governor to ever run for Lieutenant Governor and win.

SHORT: That's true, yeah.

IRVIN: But...

SHORT: Let me – let me get back a minute to your becoming Commissioner of Agriculture. Were you at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago?

IRVIN: Well, if you remember, you and I and, I don't know, a couple of other prominent businesspeople, professional people there in the Atlanta area, went through the list of potential people. Back in those days, the Governor really picked the delegates.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: And we had, I guess, the best cross-section of delegates with blacks and whites and women that the state had ever had before, but they got challenged by Julian Bond. And the challenge took half of our delegates away from us -- half of the votes -- and a lot of the prominent people came back home. We had five of our other constitutional officials, including the Commissioner of Agriculture and the Commissioner of Insurance and the Commissioner...

SHORT: The Public Service Commissioner.

IRVIN: Public Service Commissioner.

SHORT: State Treasurer.

IRVIN: State Treasurer at that time, Jack Ray. And they all switched parties.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: And I know that we had a meeting up in the -- or maybe I better not say the office building because I can't remember exactly where it was downtown, but it's where the party met for business meetings, and someone said, "Well, we'll just turn it over to the

challengers.” I said, “No.” I said, “We’ve got an obligation.” I said, “You’re the Governor. We can’t totally destroy the authority of the Governor, because we’ve got to have a strong Governor. You’ve got to have somebody that can lead, make things happen. And we’re going to put together some delegates that will do a good job.” And then when we came back home, we had to pick the electors.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: I didn’t even know you had to do that part. That’s some -- a new experience for me. But we picked good, solid people, and everybody came out, I guess, a step ahead of the system. But Campbell got an appointment as Undersecretary of Agriculture with Richard Nixon.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: And the front page of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution: “Maddox says if Campbell goes to Washington, Irvin will be the new Ag Chief.”

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: Here they come to me and I said, "Well, the Governor and I never discovered that." They said, "You mean he's going to announce that he's going to appoint you to something and you never discussed it?" I said, "We discovered everybody else, never discovered me." I said I didn't have any interest in anything else other than what I was doing. Well, as it turned out, you know, Campbell went to Washington and I went over as Ag Chief, and I remember the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in one of their editorials -- I hope I remember this pretty well accurately as it was printed: "Irvin will keep the seat warm until the people of Georgia can choose them an Ag Chief."

SHORT: Well, you've kept the seat warm.

IRVIN: And that's nearly 40 years ago.

SHORT: Forty years, that's right! Yeah. An interesting thing about that was that Jimmy Bentley, who was Controller General, and Jack Ray and those party switchers all ran for office at the next election and they all were defeated. They ran as Republicans and they all lost. So I guess you could say the only one that really made out in that party switch was Phil Campbell, who got a position in Washington. But you got to be Agriculture Commissioner. Tremendous department. A lot of responsibility.

IRVIN: Well, I -- you know, I never dreamed we had such a broad responsibility. It was -- the general public now doesn't know the depth of the responsibility that office has. You know, a lot of people have encouraged me throughout the years to run for Governor. I've never ever seriously considered it because I never have had what's called "a fire in the belly."

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: That's not too good of grammar, but that's what they used to say. You had to have that if you want to be -- if you wanted to run and get elected Governor. And I just enjoyed very much the challenges that come to the job that I've been able to hold for all these years, and I think over the years we've had great influence on a lot of policy nationwide.

You know, agriculture is a great, great industry. We are the #1 producer of chicken. We've always been the #1 producer in peanuts. Back when we used to have a lot of tobacco, we were #3 in the production of tobacco. After I led -- along with other leaders -- the eradication of the boll weevil, we were #2 in cotton. And we have an emerging fresh fruits and vegetable industry that's just humming. It's got great opportunities to expand and I'm pushing very hard and it's getting strong support from our office to see us grow a lot of those things that we used to ship in from other parts of the country and sometimes even from Central America and South America because we didn't produce it in our own home state and in our own home communities.

SHORT: Well, in addition to promotion, your department has a lot of responsibilities in food safety.

IRVIN: Well, food safety, I made that our #1 mission. You know there's been a lot in the media in the last couple or three years about contaminated food and recalls; we're getting more recalls now than ever in the history of the state. Every time there's been a recall, we're working hand-in-glove with the local communities. If it's something the feds discovered, hand-in-glove with the feds. We go in with them and help them make the recall successful to make sure that contaminated food didn't get in the hands of our consumers. And that will continue to be a great challenge in the future, because you have to put a lot of man hours in. The morning – the afternoon – we're taping this program here, I got a call from our PR Department and we've got two recalls going on now. One of them is we had to go into the facilities and pull it off the shelf..

SHORT: Hmm.

IRVIN: ...And then use the media to notify people if you've got some at home, return it. Don't take a chance. It might be harmful to you.

SHORT: Do you do those inspections? Does the State of Georgia do the inspections?

IRVIN: We do. We're the – we're the kind of the lifeblood of that program. We have 60-something what we call sanitarians or food safety inspectors, and I believe the last time I worked in that particular field, Food & Drug only had about six or seven for three or four Southern states, so we have to do the job. We've got the manpower to keep food out of the hands of our consumers, something that should never have been put in the marketplace to begin with.

One of the things we're going hope to be able to announce soon, we're working now with some very prominent ag leaders to do more – for them to do more individual testing themselves. Our ability to discover now is unlimited. Technology has come a long, long ways, and if there's something out there that's contaminated, if you'll test it, you'll find it before it gets into general circulation. That's what I want to see. And we don't have the resources to do all of it ourselves, because it just takes – it takes a lot of man hours and it takes a lot of money. And that's the taxpayers' money. But if we get all this worked out, we'll be announcing it probably before this will be fully edited, and maybe we can put a little sentence saying we got it done.

SHORT: Yeah. We're importing now a tremendous amount of food from foreign countries like China. Should we worry about that?

IRVIN: Well, I -- you know, I'm always asking the feds to do more, but I'm also asking

the legislature to give us resources so we can do more. You cannot imagine the tons of food that comes into Atlanta by air, and that's the busiest airport in the world. And every time one comes in from most any foreign country, it has containers of food aboard, and we expect to have within the next year at least one inspector stationed at the Atlanta Airport to check all that food as it comes in. I think that will put us ahead of any other country – of any other state – that I know of in the U.S. in doing this kind of inspection service. We need to do more at the ports, because a lot of it comes in by ship. And so there's room to improve, but we check when it gets out into the general warehouses -- if we don't catch it before it gets off of the ships or boats or off of the planes. And we have a good, good law because if people find it is contaminated, we can do – we can stop it right in its tracks. Food & Drug has to go to court and get a court order to do that. So we've got a really better law than they have – than Food & Drug has.

SHORT: Why are we importing so much food?

IRVIN: Well, we're – we're, you know, we're great consumers ourselves. We're one of the biggest consumers – population-wise, one of the biggest consumers – in the world. And we want our consumers to have all these different choices, and you can't possibly produce everything that they want, so why not have a program to bring it in and put some restrictions on them. I know when we started getting some contaminated food coming into Georgia from California. That's a big, big Ag state. A lot of people don't realize a lot of people live in

California, but it's the number one Ag state in the nation. And we urged them to do what I've just mentioned to you -- to do a lot of testing before they send it here, because when they send it here, I'm going to test it; and if there's anything wrong with it, we're going to turn it down and require them to destroy it. If they test it, they can save a lot of expense.

But China is continuing to be a huge, huge marketer for our products. The Governor informed me a few days ago that he's going to support my efforts for us to have an office -- an agriculture office -- in China, and we're going to be moving forward with that shortly. And if we're going to expect them to buy products from here, we've got to accept products from there.

As you know, one of -- one of the countries that I've been a national leader in is Cuba. Cuba wants to do business with us. They're doing some. Our government's a little bit antiquated. Our President does not want to allow us to have face-to-face trade with them, but I think we've got to. I remember I was the first Ag Chief in the nation to advocate doing business years ago with the old Soviet Union. And I know that during the earlier stages when I was advocating doing business with the Soviets before they were called Russians in St. Petersburg, I'd be in a civic club in most any town in Georgia and somebody was likely to get up and say, "You want to do business with the Commies!" I said, "No, I want to do business." "How can you justify doing business with the Communists?" I said, "Well, I happen to believe that if we have food that they need and they want and it's a market for us, they will not be sending the rocket ship over to pick it up."

SHORT: *Laughter* Uh-huh.

IRVIN: And I'd get a big – I'd get a big applause from the audience.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: And I think that trade has probably done more to help us have a good relationship with the Russian people now than anything else that was done, and I think agriculture and maybe some things I had a little part in might help bring that to being. And I think we have the same kind of relationship with Castro's country. He's – Fidel is out of the picture now and his brother is running the country, but I expect that we're going to see things get more moderate to how they deal with their people, and I'm looking forward to some great times -- great trade opportunities with the Cuban people in the future.

SHORT: Speaking of trade, how has NAFTA affected agriculture in Georgia?

IRVIN: Well, NAFTA's been a disappointment to a lot of people. You know, if you've been following the debates, especially on the Presidential Democratic side, there's been a lot said about NAFTA. If NAFTA had worked like it should have, it could be very helpful. But it's turned into having so many negatives that I don't know whether we'll ever be able to

make it successful or not. I have to admit I urged members of Congress to vote for it originally. If I was to urge them today, I'd urge them to vote against it, because they want to sell to us and they want to make it difficult for us to sell to them. And they've got tariffs on our products going into their country, and they want us to let their products come into here without any tariffs. And that's not – that's not fair trade. But we're going to get out from under that.

I know we were talking about doing business with Russia. I get into some of these settings and I say, "Well, if you want us to buy your underwear for me to wear, I want you to make it out of Georgia cotton."

SHORT: *Laughter*

IRVIN: And it would get a good laugh. But there's a lot of truth to that because, you know, a lot of our jobs of that type has already left us and I'm not sure if some of them will ever be able to get them back. But if we can have trade, that can fill some of the gaps.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about ethanol. Ethanol is an agricultural product. How do you see that situation panning out with regard to our energy dependence?

IRVIN: Well, let's go back up a little bit. You remember when we used to have a product called gasohol? Absolutely the same product. Alcohol. It's alcohol. And I had

urged as we move into ethanol now to get us a feeder stock that was not competitive with what we eat. Corn is in so many different products; it's driven up the price to where now we're getting scammed. Maybe I should say getting politically skinned.

SHORT: Skinned.

IRVIN: And if we could really get our research to do what I know they're working at the University to try to achieve, where pine trees and grasses and other products could be used for feeder stock, I think you'd have a great, great future. But if we're going to have to make it out of corn and it shoots up like it is recently at \$6 a bushel, you can't make ethanol out of \$6-a-bushel corn, and you can't afford to pay that for every piece of cornmeal or every cereal or the sugar that's made from corn. It's going to have a negative effect because it causes the price of food to go up – everything from milk, beef, pork, cereals, all the other products. And I haven't talked to them recently, but I suspect Coca-Cola is having to pay probably double or triple what they used to have to pay for the sweetener for the soft drinks. And anything that affects it that heavily, it becomes negative -- because it looks like it was a villain, when really the villain was for us pushing the product before we were ready to come up with a proper feeder stock that I'd advocated to be the product that we make the ethanol from.

But, hopefully – hopefully we can have a discovery and be able to do that, and I know one plant that's been announced in Georgia that says they're going to have some new

technology. I'm looking forward to seeing it. And if it works, maybe we can get it back on-stream. If we doesn't, it will never – it will never advance like a lot of us would like to see.

SHORT: Speaking of food prices, they have been creeping up over the past few years. Is that a temporary thing or...

IRVIN: Well, I suspect that nothing's ever temporary, but I think we've got to get it under control and I think the things we've talked about already are some of the things that made this happen. If we can get that resolved, I think we'll see it moderate back down, maybe not to where it was, but it won't be considered triple what it used to be. We have been very fortunate in the U.S. – in Georgia, as well as the rest of the U.S. – throughout the years of having very stable prices for the food that we eat. We get, I don't want to use the word "cheap," but in some terms what it would be for other countries, it has been very relatively cheap. And so we're now up to where we're having to pay about the same price as probably they're having to pay. And when you're having to pay \$4 a gallon – I saw here as I drove into town \$4-something a gallon for diesel fuel to power your trucks to haul these products – that goes right back into the cost. You have your tractors, your pumps that pump the water for irrigation to farms in the Southern part of our state, and it's going to be – they've got to have these higher prices or they can't pay that price for the energy that it takes to do the producing. Nitrogen's advancing so fast that I hear people that are in that business tell me that they will not price it for delivery a week from

now; they want to price it the day they make the delivery, because it goes up every day.

I heard on the news this morning that gas has been going up 1 or 2 or 3 cents a gallon overnight -- and more than one day in a row! We've never had that happen before in the history of America. And all that -- all those inflationary prices -- are affecting everything that we do, including food that we produce and food that we eat.

SHORT: Now speaking of immigration, what effect is the current discussion of immigration having on Georgia agriculture?

IRVIN: Well, so far it hasn't had a whole lot of effect. And we've got to have a sensible program. I know -- I know there's a strong feeling from the general public -- they want the illegals out of here. If we have somebody that's been working at the same place, same farm for the last eight or ten years and they've been stable and they buy the food and pay the same taxes we pay, I think we've got to find a way to make them legal. Not a citizen. Not citizenship, but a green card. I think that's what they call it, isn't it?

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: And -- but I also heard that they're raiding some major chicken companies -- and one of them has a presence here in Georgia -- and causing the plant to be closed down. I

know back four or five years ago when the Immigration people went out into the fields in south Georgia when people -- when these Hispanics were harvesting the Vidalia onions and harvesting our beans and peas and squash and okra and tomatoes and our vegetable crops -- those people armed and going in the fields -- and they run. I guess if I was in a foreign country and I was working and I see somebody coming out with a bunch of armed people, I'd probably run too! But we've got to work on that one, and I think it will be worked out.

I've felt all along this was a national issue, and Congress owes it to the American people to adopt a sensible program to deal with this. And once they do that, I think all of us as leaders need to get behind whatever that program is and help make it work. It will be teamwork and I'm willing to do my part. As I say, don't make -- don't give illegals citizenship, but make it possible for them to get a work card and if they quit work, they're immediately shipped back home.

SHORT: Well now, let's get on another subject here. You're doing a great job with that department. It's one of the leading departments in the country. But you also have had vast experience in dealing with important people in the State of Georgia, and I'd like to ask you about a few of them.

Of course, you were very close to Governor Maddox. You were his Floor Leader and his Executive Secretary and you served as Agriculture Commissioner during his administration and for -- what? -- 38 more years of other administrations, and I'd like to talk a little bit about

that. Tell me – I think Marvin Griffin was the Governor when you came to the legislature.

Right?

IRVIN: That's correct.

SHORT: Governor Griffin. What did you think about Governor Griffin?

IRVIN: Well, you know, Griffin was a – I didn't vote for Griffin when he was elected, and when I got down to Capitol Hill, Cheney aggravated me something awful, and he would call people up in Habersham County saying that he needs my vote -- to get them to call me and twist my arm to get me to vote for them. And they'd call me, but say, "You vote your own convictions." And that's what I did. But Marvin tried to enact some legislation that just wouldn't go. I know one of the – one of the pieces of legislation that I was able to kill as a young legislator was one dealing with an issue about black or white. And this issue was that I think Georgia was planning to play one of the Pennsylvania colleges, either Penn State or Pittsburgh -- you know, I don't remember which one in the Sugar Bowl.

SHORT: Pittsburgh.

IRVIN: And they had a black on their team and he put – he put a bill in to prohibit any

school in Georgia from having athletic competition with a person of another race -- who had a person of another race on their team. Well, you know that wouldn't work. I led that fight and we killed that bill. I got called down to the Governor's Office on that, but I thought I did the right thing. But he was really the last of the old segregation crowd. He came along at a time when I guess you needed to have that flavor to get elected.

I know Carl Sanders was the first Governor that kind of broke ranks on that and tried to be -- to have -- a moderate influence on the racial issues. And I know he -- during the campaign he called me out to the mansion a couple of times and I met with him and we were able to get some good pointers from him on how to advise Governor Maddox. And, as I said earlier on in this program, you and I, I think, had a lot of influence on getting him to take center stage and be moderate on social issues. But Carl did not have the success that Lester did on his appointments. Now Carl made some good appointments, but the racial issue was still in the air I guess then and some of his good appointments couldn't get elected to the ballot box. Lester's did.

SHORT: Yeah.

IRVIN: And that was kind of amazing I guess to all of us to see how things could happen. And then Ernest Vandiver came along, and I know that I think he tried to move it in that direction. And we've been steadily I think dealing with that issue about as well as any state

in the nation. I think Georgia's really been the Empire State of the South, and I think we've demonstrated very, very well in that field and I think we've lived up to all the good credentials that you could give us.

SHORT: You worked very closely with Senator Talmadge when he was Chairman...

IRVIN: Right.

SHORT: ...of the Agriculture Committee.

IRVIN: Well, he was – he was very important to me in my earlier days. He was very helpful. And I don't mind telling you that when my good friend, Zell Miller, ran against him, I voted for Herman. And I suspect that that election was the downfall of Lester's – of Herman's administration, because I remember all the stuff about the coat with the hundred dollar bills in it.

SHORT: Yeah. Right.

IRVIN: I don't know whether there was anything of it, but I know that was some of the talk in the political circles. But Talmadge was a good public servant and I'm glad to have been able to call him a good colleague to work with.

SHORT: You've worked with a lot of Governors.

IRVIN: Yeah.

SHORT: You worked with President Carter when he was Governor.

IRVIN: Well, Carter -- Carter was -- it's amazing about Carter, he made one bad mistake early on -- and he didn't make it the second time -- and that's when he was trying to influence the curtailment of the *Market Bulletin*.

SHORT: Yeah. Oh yes! I knew that was coming in this conversation.

IRVIN: And he was going to do it budget-wise, and I felt so strong I ran a front page story right in the middle of the page urging people to contact their legislators to make sure that he could not cut the money out of the budget for the *Market Bulletin*.

SHORT: Tell the folks what the *Market Bulletin* is.

IRVIN: Well, it's a publication that -- it's -- you'd have to really get it to really

understand how strong a constituency that it has of its own. Our readership – it's on the Internet now, so we know the hits – we've always figured it had somewhere around anywhere from three quarters to a million readers a week. It goes out every other week now, so we'll say every other week. And the people love it. And I don't care, in any sizable congregation I get in, you'll have some get up and say, "We really appreciate the *Market Bulletin*." But it's a touch of paper! I changed the name of it from *Market Bulletin* to *Farmers and Consumers Market Bulletin* because I wanted to give the consumer face. But if you have something you want to sell – needlework, patchwork, flowers, plants – it has an economic benefit to our state of several hundred million dollars a year. We haven't had a survey done recently to see what it is now, but if you have something you want to – if you've got a piece of farm equipment or you want to buy a piece of farm equipment – the *Market Bulletin* will sell it for you or it'll find it for you. And it's a great publication and, unfortunately, budget folks cut it to where I can only send it out every other week back when the Republicans got in charge, but I don't think they'll mess with it anymore. I think they see the value of it now.

SHORT: Well, I get it and I read it religiously. I'm not a farmer, but there are a lot of things in there that are of great interest to me. George Busbee.

IRVIN: Well, Busbee and I were in the same class that came to the state legislature in 1957 and took office in '58. No, took office – 1956 -- took office in '57. I've got to get those

dates straight.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: It was so long ago, you kind of forget the semantics of things. But Busbee was a good Governor to work with. I didn't have any problems with any of them. That one thing with Carter was the only disagreement I had with him. I was able to help him on a lot of things after that. And I go to bat to help the Governor on everything. And the current Governor, I've told him – I told him as we started our second year, I said, "You and I are going to be retiring at the same time. I'd like to do everything I can to see that we both leave on a high and not on a low."

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: And I think that has had some influence with him and recommending to go along with us in China. You know, the Governor's a Governor and it's a powerful position, and I think it's – I think -- but he can't do it all by himself. He needs people like myself who are willing to help him. I'm on the Georgia Finance Investment Commission Board with him and that's a very powerful committee, as you well know, and he's been all right to work with.

I don't play the partisan as much as some of my Republican friends do. I tell folks I

don't know a thing in the world that the Georgia Department of Agriculture does that's partisan. We serve people. And I appreciate every day when I'm having a staff meeting with my staff to keep in sight that if we do a good job of serving the public, they'll give us credit for it. And that's the best politics you can have is people saying you're doing a job and doing it well.

I don't go anywhere in Georgia that I don't run into people who come up to me and say, "I never met you before. I'm glad to meet you. I wanted to come up and tell you I appreciate the great job you've been doing for us." That makes you – that, that makes you feel good.

SHORT: What is – speaking of Republicans – what is your take on the great rise in strength of the Republican Party in Georgia?

IRVIN: Well, I think – I think the biggest mistake Democrats have made is to let their bench get thin. You know what that is? That's...

SHORT: I do know.

IRVIN: ...good, quality people that want to run for public office. You know, apparently I was a good young man when I ran and I was willing to work hard and willing to be committed and people voted for me. But if you don't keep recruiting people into the system, you can get where you don't have enough good, high quality people seeking office to prevail. I

don't have no earthly idea whether a Democrat or a Republican will succeed me or not, but I would urge either one of them to not run basically on a party label but run on a service label. Say, "If you elect me, I'll do you a good job, and I won't let partisan politics get in the way." I think a lot of people are getting sick and tired of how partisan things have gotten. And I don't believe I'm totally misreading it either.

SHORT: Yeah, I think you're right. A lot of partisanship. Well, I think the general public is sort of angry with politics and government anyway. Take this -- this is an election year. It's been going on now for how long? Two years? Fifteen months I believe I heard last night; 15 months we've put up with the Presidential race this year. And I picked up the paper this morning and found out that people have already announced for Governor of Georgia in the next election, which is what, three or four years away? Three years away?

IRVIN: Well, I haven't read the paper.

SHORT: So you've got -- you know, people are tiring of politics, and I think that the leaders in each party ought to understand that and attempt to satisfy the public. And that's going to take a lot of leadership to do.

IRVIN: As I mentioned earlier on, I think there's been a time in my past career as a

public servant that had I chosen to run for Governor, I'd have been a good candidate.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: And I think there may have been a time or two that I could've probably run and won. But see I never did want it, as I mentioned, and I'm going to urge whoever runs for my office – and there'll probably be several to run: Don't get embedded in partisan politics. Tell the people what you're going to do with the Department. You're going to inherit a good Department, because I'm going to make sure of that. And I'd like to see you take it and build on what you take charge of. Always new eyes can see things to improve. It won't make me jealous; I want to see them do better. And if they'll do that and they get elected, if they choose they can be elected a second or third time.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: I know I was asked the question on numerous occasions: What do I contribute to the fact that I've been elected again and again and again, as you mentioned early on, ten different times statewide? That's a big record for Georgia and that's a record for the nation. And I think the fact is I've been focused on my job. Put that first. And if you do your job, that'll be the best PR you can have on election day.

SHORT: As you look back on your career, what do you think is your biggest accomplishment?

IRVIN: Well, I didn't mention it awhile ago, I think one of the greatest things I was able to accomplish was not in agriculture -- it was in education. I was author of the constitutional amendment that -- Dick Russell was the author of the School Lunch Program at the federal level and I was the author of the constitutional amendment that funded and set the program up in Georgia at the state level. And that had to be voted on by two-thirds of the House and Senate -- had to be voted on statewide, and it passed. That was probably the thing that I still point to as one of my #1 greatest achievements.

The next one that probably got more attention was my efforts to eradicate the boll weevil.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: You know, boll weevils run the cotton out of a lot of places in Georgia, including the Northern part of our state. And it's made cotton come back like gangbusters, and so I'm very proud of that.

I would suspect that one of the things early on that I was able to develop a program that became the national program was getting rid of hog cholera. Not too many people who are

going to see this video can ever remember what one of the saddest signs you used to see, the TV cameras humming when you see people killing hundreds of hogs and burying them because they had hogs. It was a sad sight. And we got rid of that.

And we got rid of tuberculosis in dairy herds. We got rid of tuberculosis – that's called Bang's disease – in cattle herds.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: And we had a string of great successes that I think I can reminisce in my old age and say, "Well, I had a part in that."

SHORT: What was your biggest disappointment?

IRVIN: Very few, and I'd say most of my disappointments were small. One was a disappointment that I lost part of the funding for the *Market Bulletin*, as I mentioned early on.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: But I haven't had any strong disappointments. I may have had some things that I could've done better, but I did the best I could. And I think I did – I always look at it like

this. If you really focus on what you're doing and really get into it and get your reins in your hands, you can always do whatever it is as good as anyone else. And that's all that can ever be expected of anyone. And if you loosen up on the reins, that's when things can go awry and things can happen that you wouldn't want to see happen. I tried to make sure I didn't have much of that happen in my many years.

I know that Howard Overby from Gainesville -- when I was trying to get my constitutional amendment approved to establish the School Lunch Program -- he came up and tapped me on the shoulder and whispered in my ear and said, "You're not doing too well with your questions." He said, "Ask that your bill be recommitted to committee." He had so much confidence, I didn't even question him. I said, "Mr. Speaker, let me move that this bill be recommitted to committee." Then he called me off to the side and said, "You weren't doing well." He said, "You needed to get busy and study your own proposal and be where you can answer any questions that they will throw at you, because, if you don't, you can't ever get a constitutional amendment passed, because, you know, it takes two-thirds of the votes." And I did a good enough job when it came back up, I don't think I had one or two votes cast against it. That was a -- that was somebody telling me something that I'd done wrong and told me how to correct it.

SHORT: Yes.

IRVIN: You've got to have – you've got to have – friends to be on the lookout for you. I think the greatest thing you can have as a public official is to have some people in every community that keeps you informed about what's going on in that community. It's a big old state and, you know, I don't get to Young Harris that often. I don't live that far away, but I need to know what's going on over here and I'm glad we've got you around to keep me informed.

SHORT: Thank you. How would you like to be remembered?

IRVIN: You know, you can say a lot of things. I think the thing that would be best to be remembered is that you did a good job and there'd never been any hint in any way of anything improper. You know, people this day and time always got their hand in somebody else's pocket and are dipping in the till.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: And I think the fact that I've been able to be in public office as long as I have and there's never been a hint of anything improper, it's been a challenge. Because, you know, you don't always have to do it yourself to get accused of it.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: If you allow it to happen under your administration, we've had some people we've had to prosecute and that's going to happen regardless. But we will not allow anybody to be in our administration and stay there after doing something that's improper, and I would think that to finish your long tenure – and, as we mentioned, if I stay to the end of this term it'll be -- counting the school board -- altogether it'll be 55 years – and to have that with steady progress, great accomplishments, and do it without any hint of anything improper is as good as you could ask for.

SHORT: Well, you've certainly done that.

IRVIN: Well, thank you.

SHORT: Questions?

MALE AUDIENCE: What's the state doing in regards to the -- our hemlock destruction? Anything?

SHORT: Let me – let me rephrase it. What is the state doing toward solving the hemlock destruction problem?

IRVIN: The Georgia Forestry Commission is in charge of that and I'm very familiar with how devastating it can be, but we don't have any real authority in that field. One time in the past -- and this was during the Carter administration -- there was a proposal to transfer that agency to the Department of Agriculture, but it never did happen. And I didn't want to get claimed to being out trying to grab around and build an empire so I didn't fight to get it, but it could've probably been adequately served in our field, because I get asked that question quite often.

MALE AUDIENCE: Okay.

IRVIN: And another thing, a lot of people think we have some great influence over the county agents, and they're a product of the University of Georgia College of Agriculture. But I'd like to see it given some attention, and I may get an opportunity to tell their Commissioner that that question was asked of me here today.

MALE AUDIENCE: I keep seeing things and hearing things and reading stories about the collapse of the honeybee hives.

IRVIN: Yeah, that's been a -- that's been a real mystery to everybody in the field. You

know, I'm not sure if the scientists have found out yet what is causing that. We're involved in that, because we -- you know, we have to inspect honeybees. But every disease we've had up to now we've been able to eventually get it pretty well under control. But right now my staff tells me now that they don't know what's causing it. And the Dean of the College of Agriculture tells me the same thing, and I'm not sure we have a solution to that yet. But it's absolutely necessary that we have our bees to survive, because you cannot have all these things -- all these we've been talking about could not be grown if you didn't have bees to do the pollination. That's another thing. A lot of people don't realize how important pollination is, but if you don't have pollination you don't have production.

SHORT: No more questions?

MALE AUDIENCE: Is there any chance you will run for another term?

IRVIN: Well, let's say it's my intention to retire. The old saying is: "Don't ever say never, because you might change your mind." But I'd have to have a drastic change of mind before I would ever even think about considering running again. I say that because I think we'll have some qualified people that will run. If some of the people I've heard mentioned will give it serious consideration and run, there are some people that I could support. And that's all I want. You know, I will be in my 80s, and it's time to retire. And I can give you a little sidebar.

I've done had the analyst do it. My take-home pay will go up substantially from my pension than it does from my salary. [Laughter]

MALE AUDIENCE: What thoughts do you have on the current Democratic Presidential primary?

IRVIN: Well, you know, I was a friend of Bill Clinton's. He'd call me occasionally. Some people say they didn't think Presidents ever called anybody, but he'd call me occasionally. And he – I remember one time at the Governor's mansion when he was President, he came down the line and I gave a little whisper in his ear. And I had a little thing I'll do sometimes -- I'd get about two or three bars in a memorandum and put it in an envelope and I'd see him and I'd say, "Stick this in your pocket for when you have time to read it." I found out he'd read it and responded to it, and so I had a dialogue with him. And he called me recently and asked me to meet him in Atlanta, and wanted me to go down to Mercer and introduce him at Mercer College. And I accepted that invitation. So if my position, which I understand is pretty solid, is to be a delegate, I will vote for Hillary.

SHORT: That begs this question. The Democratic party has, of course, the super delegates which can and probably will decide the outcome of this election. Do you think those super delegates should have the power to override their constituency?

IRVIN: Well, I don't think you're going to see much of that in Georgia. From what I looked at, the people have already declared it's going to be pretty well along the lines that's voted. I know my hometown went 2:1 for Hillary.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: Where I live.

SHORT: Right.

IRVIN: So I can say I voted with my constituency where I live.

SHORT: Right. Well, that's an interesting aspect.

IRVIN: And, you know, the 9th District – excuse me, the 10th District, which I live in, is really a Republican district.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: But I carried it solid in my last election. That tells me that they will vote for the person. I can't get a real good feeling for it. I think the Republicans are not going to give up the Presidency without a big, heavy fight. It's not going to be easy for anyone to take that job. But I think they've got a weak candidate; I think they could've done better. But I didn't have a part in choosing that, so I should keep my mouth shut.

SHORT: Other questions? Well, thank you very much, Commissioner Irvin. It's been a great pleasure to have you. I want to thank you on behalf of the ICL, Young Harris College and the Russell Library at the University of Georgia.

IRVIN: Thank you, Bob. It's been a great pleasure to have known you throughout the years and to have the opportunity to work with you so closely through the real formative years of me getting into leadership positions.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

IRVIN: I will always value that friendship.

SHORT: Well, thank you.

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