

**John Blackmon interviewed by Bob Short**

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**John Blackmon**

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BOB SHORT: This is Bob Short; and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics, sponsored  
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John Blackmon of Pine Mountain Valley has the distinction of having served in the capacity of State Revenue Commissioner under two Georgia Governors: Lester Maddox and Jimmy Carter.

John is well known throughout the state for his unblemished career in state government.

Governor Zell Miller once referred to him as a statesman when he named him chair of the Georgia Democratic Party in 1995.

John, we're honored to have you today as our guest.

JOHN BLACKMON: Thank you, Bob. I'm honored, of course, to be here.

SHORT: Let's begin by having you tell us about your early life, I believe in Columbus, and your life before politics.

BLACKMON: Well, I was born in Columbus to a family that has been there since the Indians, graduated from Columbus High School in 1951, went to...the closest thing we had to a community college was Auburn, went to Auburn; at Auburn, studied industrial management and was a member of the Air Force ROTC, which, after graduation and being commissioned, did three years of active duty with the Air Force. I came back to go to law school out at Emory, and following law school at Emory did 20 years in the Georgia Air National Guard. I'm proud of that service, obviously.

At the time I graduated from law school, all the action was in Atlanta or I would have gone home to Columbus. I didn't realize at the time, Bob, but it was a critical...pivotal point in Georgia

political history. I knew I wanted to be a tax lawyer. I had been sold on public finance by a great professor at Auburn by the name of Collins. I wonder if he was Marcus Collins' kinfolk. Anyway, Professor Collins introduced me to the subtleties of public finance, and I knew I wanted to do a tax practice. I would have done it with the IRS, but they required that you locate in something other than your home state. I had been away in the Air Force for three years, had no desire to leave Georgia again.

At that time, professors at Emory were permitted to do a part-time private practice. Professor Ben Johnson's part-time work was in the law department division representing the state revenue commission. When he found out that I was interested in state tax matters, I'm very proud to say that Dean Johnson, he was to be the dean, Dean Johnson, of the law school later, recommended me to then Attorney General Eugene Cook, but, more importantly, recommended me to Julia McClatchey-Cook, Mr. Cook's wife, who was quite the administrator of the state law department at that time. So I went to work anticipating that I would work directly with Ben Johnson. From the time I accepted the offer in early July of 1961 to the time I arrived a couple of weeks later, Professor Johnson became Dean Johnson of the Emory Law School, and I never had the opportunity to work with him.

But at the time I became a young lawyer in the state law department, I had anticipated being there a couple of years and going home to Columbus and practice law. It turned out I stayed seven years, three and a half of those years working for Mr. Eugene Cook and three and a half years working for Mr. Arthur Bolton, two fascinating and interesting people with very different attitudes, very different views of the civilized world.

Arthur Bolton had been a tank commander for General Patton's Third Army in the Battle of the Bulge. He had been severely wounded. They thought he would never survive; and if he did survive, he'd never walk again. A wonderful, dedicated nurse who became his wife nursed him back to health and married him. But he could never walk without pain.

We had a significant case to be heard in Fulton Superior Court, and I remember carrying Mr. Bolton's satchel because it got him off-balance if he carried it. And I thought to myself I'm sure proud to be walking with this true American hero, Arthur Bolton, and working for him.

I had occasion thereafter to work with Mr. Bolton with seven very active years in the Georgia Revenue Department. The relationship between the two departments was traditional. I was very proud of having worked for both the law department and the revenue department. But if anyone had told me when I joined the law department staff in the summer of 1961 that in the summer or the spring of 1968 I would become Lester Maddox's revenue commissioner, I never would have believed it. The only thing I knew about Governor Maddox was what I had read in the paper. I had never met him personally. And, of course, the press image was not the best. In fact, I was concerned about his tenure as governor. I was apprehensive and, quite frankly, offered my resignation; I was ready to leave the law department even though I was a very low-level minion at the time. I was fearful of the politics that might erupt. Fortunately, that never happened.

The fact is that when I did offer my resignation, a great Georgian from Elberton, Georgia, Mr. Peyton Hawes, had accepted an appointment as the state revenue commissioner. I was very flattered when Mr. Hawes asked if I would postpone my departure from the department and stay on to work with him and his commission. At the time, I had assumed he had filled out his staff

and I would be working with him as his lawyer. And in fact he had, but about a year later a vacancy popped up in the deputy revenue commissioner's office. Mr. Hawes was nice enough to ask me to serve in that capacity. So I joined him as deputy commissioner in the spring of 1968. And by the way, let me correct myself: It was in the spring of 1970 that I became Lester Maddox's revenue commissioner, not '68. In '68 I went over to the department of the deputy commissioner and was serving as the deputy commissioner when Lester Maddox appointed Peyton Hawes to the State Supreme Court, and that created the vacancy that I filled on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970, was sworn in as state revenue commissioner. And, Bob, I remember it vividly. You remember those days.

I remember on one occasion asking Peyton, who was a distinguished lawyer of retirement age at the time he took the revenue commissioner's job for Governor Maddox, why he took such a heavy-duty assignment; he was entitled to his retirement. And he told me an interesting story, Bob. He said he and Lester had been competitors in a crowded field running for governor four years prior to that. All of the other candidates for governor jumped on Lester, said what a terrible fellow he was, so forth. Peyton refused to attack Lester Maddox in that campaign. Peyton said on one occasion they were leaving the TV station after a debate, he said Lester came over and said, "Mr. Peyton, when I'm governor you've got to help me." Peyton said he thought that was rather absurd and he laughed, and he said, "Lester, when you're governor, I'll help you." He said "Governor Maddox called up at home, asked me to serve; when I tried to back off, he reminded me that I had promised to help him when he was governor." And for that reason, he accepted the appointment as commissioner.

Peyton was extraordinary for his time, the Senate class and the House of Representatives; the legislative class of 1960 was literally the class the stars fell on. It was Carl Sanders, Jimmy Carter, Zell Miller; and I might add on the republican side there were Bob Bell and Oliver Bateman, two extraordinary people, two good senators, and Republicans. In fact, Bob, I've often said currently our Republicans vintage the '60s were head and shoulders above the current Republicans. But the opportunity to work in state government for 14 years starting in 196, in the entire modern history of our state, there's never been a more exciting, productive time to work in state government.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about Lester Maddox. Lester Maddox, as you know, was a rare governor. He had the audacity to attack some of the problems that his predecessors had ignored for years.

BLACKMON: Exactly.

SHORT: Such as humaneness and corrections, such as the pardon and parole situation, speed traps, illegal gambling on our coastal highway. Tell me about your experiences with Lester Maddox.

BLACKMON: My experience with Governor Maddox was 100 percent positive. I was never in his presence where he uttered a racial epithet; he never spoke ill of any person individually or

collectively based upon politics. So his private conduct was in conflict with his public image as created by the newspaper. When I first met Governor Maddox, he was a new governor, quite controversial. All of us were waiting to see what kind of administration he might have. Clearly the appointment of Peyton Hawes as revenue commissioner bode well for his administration. I was still working that first year of his tenure in the state law department. He had reports of misconduct in the South Georgia prison. He asked for an investigation. Mr. Bolton appointed senior people from his staff; and though I'd only been there two or three years, I was given the assignment to investigate the prison in South Georgia for the governor.

Mr. Bolton took me over to the governor's office and introduced me to Governor Maddox. That was the first time I met him. His interest in prisoner fair treatment, decent treatment was very real. He took it personally. He looked me in the eye, Bob, and said "If they're abusing the prisoners, we want it stopped right away, no if's, and's, or's, or but's." So that was my first introduction to Lester Maddox. His interest in what he referred to as the little people was very real, his Little People's Day...

I had a serious tax matter to see Governor Maddox about. He was always active, always doing something, always in motion. And it was difficult even for us department heads to get an appointment. So the way you did was you went over and just sort of caught him as he came in and out of the governor's office. Well, that day I went over on a rather serious tax matter, and it was Little People's Day. So I just fell in line with the little people. And when I got up to say hello, Governor, the governor would say what can I do for you? It just broke Governor Maddox up. He thought it was just a hoot to see his revenue commissioner in line with the little people.

But he enjoyed that. He enjoyed that very much.

He had a sense of humor. He didn't take himself too seriously, but he was a real genuine people person. I might add, since you've asked me about governors, I'd like for the record to show that of the two governors I served with, Lester Maddox and Jimmy Carter, for a total of five years, not once did either one of those governors ever interfere with my administration of the tax laws of this state. They never asked for favors. They never asked me to make a particular ruling of any kind. It was totally apolitical. No favors were asked by my two governors during my tenure.

The public image of "political fixes," that was not the style of either Lester or Jimmy. They took public issues seriously. Governor Maddox advocated a local option sales tax before such became politically popular. In advocating that, it was quite controversial at the time. But before he advocated it, he did a serious study and put me through the grinder to determine who was going to pay that tax. Who did it hit the hardest? And it was only after he determined that the little people who received government services would benefit more than the burden put upon them to pay the tax. In other words, it was a net gain for little people to have the sales tax. And it was only after he satisfied himself that that was the case that he would advocate such a tax.

And by the way, speaking of history of the sales tax, the first state sales tax was born in the early '50s when Senator Talmadge was governor. And it was quite controversial with all sorts of lawsuits and reenactments before it finally got on its feet as a 3 percent state sales tax. Years later during his administration, on one occasion I was asked to sit in for Governor Carter on the State Chamber of Commerce Pre-Legislative Forum, which is a speaking program with one guy

from the federal side, one from the state side, and they travel around the state to 12 or 14 cities outlining the upcoming year and the legislature and the congress. I was asked to fill in for Governor Carter on one occasion. My fellow colleague was Senator Talmadge. And I can't tell you how much I enjoyed hearing Senator Talmadge speak for 14 consecutive days. It was wonders, it really was.

One of our first stops was in Gainesville, Georgia. Senator Talmadge, being a statesman, always spoke first. I was the footnote to his remarks. When I started my response that day, I congratulated Senator Talmadge on the enactment of the sales tax when he was governor, and I meant it as a sincere compliment. Sales tax had become the most popular tax we had. But literally his jaw fell open, and he looked around sheepishly. He caught me later that evening at the social hour and said, "John, do me a favor: Never in public remind people that I imposed a tax." So even 20 years later, when it had become a matter of positive governance on the part of Herman, Senator Talmadge was still hesitant about mentioning sales tax. And by the way, I would say the same thing for my legislative leaders and congressional leaders. While I was commissioner, we had Senator Russell; we had Senator Talmadge. But the legislative leadership and the congressional leadership, they never called me for special favors or special interpretations. It simply was not done, which I have always enjoyed remembering because I consider it a great credit to them, not to me, but to them.

As a matter of fact, I didn't mention Tom Murphy. Speaker Murphy was very much a part of my career. He was sympathetic to good tax enactments. He was consistently conservative. He made my tenure noteworthy, noteworthy in that there were 130 amendments to the Georgia Tax

Code during my tenure as revenue commissioner. We averaged about 30 per year. We changed and modernized tax laws on banks, the liquor industry, the airline industry, the real estate industry. We brought the sales tax up to date. We brought the income tax up to date. All of those enactments came during Speaker Murphy's tenure. He managed to enact those improvements in the tax law without them becoming political controversies. He was able to present them for what I hoped they were, which was moderate progressive government dealing with taxes.

One of the most significant changes we made in the law, our state income tax was a pale image or reflection of the federal law; it was essentially the same, but with just enough changes that you had to compute them separately. Went to the Speaker with Governor Carter's encouragement, said, "Mr. Speaker, let's just tie into the federal. So once you know what you're going to pay in federal tax, make one or two changes so you don't have to reinvent the wheel to pay the state income tax." He supported it. It was enacted. I'm proud to say it's still the law in Georgia here in the year 2008.

But at the time that improvement was made, computers were coming online. The students at Georgia Tech had determined that computers were going to put all the engineers out of work. So they paraded right here on Peachtree Street in the nude with signs that said "computers are obscene." And it was in that environment that the revenue department vintage 1971 got the largest single IBM computer in captivity at that time for the purpose of administering the state tax laws. When we switched over and tied into the federal definition of taxable income, we never programmed it in the revenue department, failed to program it in the computer that teacher

retirement pay was tax exempt. So the year we kicked it off, the computer generated 100,000 delinquent tax notices that went to retired teachers that said you owe tax. So you can imagine the controversy that blew up on that occasion.

I got irate phone calls from everyone who had ever had a favorite teacher. The phone call I remember most vividly, I won't call him by name, but you would know him if I did. Big, burly tobacco farmer from South Georgia. He called me up, and he said "You sent this notice to Ms. Minnie over in the nursing home;" he said "I'm going to come to Atlanta and whoop your ass." And I left instructions to the security people to keep him out of the building until he cooled off. But at the same time, the Atlanta papers I think it was, or maybe it was the Columbus paper, asked me what I was going to do about this new computer foul-up. "I said I'm going down to parade with the nude students from Tech that computers are obscene." So even collecting state and local taxes on occasion can be memorable.

SHORT: As you said, Peyton Hawes was a distinguished and well-liked Georgia figure. I recall that Mr. Hawes on many, many occasions acted as an ambassador for Governor Maddox to the business community and to the hierarchy in the press and to those types of individuals. Did you inherit that job?

BLACKMON: Somewhat. I had no background in politics. I had come straight out of law school straight to the state law department, from there to the state revenue department. I had high regard for those people who ran and held elective office. But I was the young guy. I hope I

complemented Peyton Hawes; but, believe me, I was no statesman. I could help, and I followed up in the sense that I kept those lines of communication open, but I never led myself to believe that I was Peyton's substitute as a representative of the governor. He was truly a statesman; I was the young guy who worked there and was glad to be that.

SHORT: When Maddox was governor, you worked closely with his executive secretary, who later appointed you chair of the Georgia Democratic Party for Zell Miller. Let's talk for a little bit about Zell Miller.

BLACKMON: Governor Miller, an extraordinary man, an extraordinary politician. I had occasion to work with him, as you pointed out, as the governor's executive secretary. He too accepted no superficial answers. He wanted to know the real answers. How does this really affect people? How does it really affect development in our state? Will it help attract new business and new jobs?

Governor Miller, as executive secretary to Governor Maddox, maintained that same businesslike approach. Some of our friends talk about applying business principles to government. Well, you can do that only up to a point apparently. If you try to do it completely, things get a little confused. But Governor Miller, I never worked with him during his gubernatorial term with one exception, and that was when he asked me to serve as chairman of the state party. I was flattered to be asked. My wife always said one of the side effects of collecting taxes is you age quickly. So between 1975 and '95 I had morphed into some type of person, some type of figurehead

statesman. Never thought of myself as a statesman, but Connie pointed out I had lived long enough and worked hard enough to be sort of a statesman.

Governor Miller flattered me by talking to me after the '94 election. And that was when the Republican Party took the majority of the congressional seats. That was the Contract with America year. It was his judgment that the party needed someone whose experience and reputation would allow him to go talk to the substantial business leadership and ask them to examine the Democratic Party and candidates and give us a fair chance of maintaining our respected position in state government.

So when I asked Governor Miller what he wanted me to do as chairman, I had begged off on running the party and setting the agenda. We didn't need anyone to set political agendas; we had the best there was in Governor Miller to set the political agenda. What was needed in 1995 was a calm voice that said, "Come reason with us, don't put down our party, stick with us." And to that extent, I was flattered to be asked, and I undertook that with genuine pride. I went to the people I knew in the business community. I did ask for patience and understanding for the Democratic Party and its leaders, particularly continued support for the programs being promoted in the Georgia General Assembly.

Let me give you an example. After I had left state government and while he was serving as lieutenant governor, Governor Miller on occasion asked me repeatedly, John, do you think it's a good idea to exempt food from the sales tax? I always told him, yes, it is, Governor; it is an excellent idea to exempt food from sales tax. With property tax we had homestead exemption. Property tax had a conscience. With income tax, we had the minimum standard deduction.

Income tax had a conscience. Our sales tax was lacking a conscience. And exempting food provided that conscience for sales tax.

So I was proud that he asked me on an informal basis, and I was doubly proud that he took my observations and my encouragement and that he worked until he got that exemption enacted. It wasn't that I was without the ability to talk and have an input with Governor Miller while he was lieutenant governor, and I'm proud of what he did for the sales tax, among other things.

SHORT: Before we get too far along, John, I would like to talk to you a little bit about your role in the Carter administration. As we all know, Carter was elected in 1970 over a governor who had had a good record and who was popular, Carl Sanders. Carter's number one plank on his platform was government reorganization. Now, I know that you had a role in that.

BLACKMON: Yes. As a matter of fact, Governor Carter expected all of his department heads, all of his team to support and work aggressively for the passage of that reorganization. I did; I was proud to have done so. But as part of state government reorganization, the consolidation of all of the human service organizations into a new department called human resources, the consolidation of all of the parks services, all of the environmental services into what became the Department of Natural Resources, those things were a great giant step improvement in state government. I was proud to work on behalf of Governor Carter to help get such enacted by the General Assembly. That was truly the first government-wide reorganization effort since Governor Dick Russell in the '30s.

The one direct activity that I had hands-on experience with was the state money management. Remember, we were collecting millions of dollars. And the money management system of the state was outdated, was ineffective. We were not managing our money properly. So prior to the state government reorganization, since I was collecting the money I was allowed to make recommendations; and I recommended that we have a central agency to manage the state's money, that it not be a political function; it be a professional function. That advice was taken. The state treasurer's office, which was a political anachronism, was repealed. A state money management system was put into place, and immediately the benefit of having idle funds at interest at work, the first year collected \$27 million in additional interest as a result of that reorganization.

That concept of money management, of managing natural resources, of managing people resources, 95 percent of the state government reorganization enacted in 1972 is still in effect, still functioning, still benefiting the people of Georgia; and I might add that the fellow that I enjoyed working with as part of the state government reorganization, created a money management system that benefited the state, was Bert Lance. Bert doesn't take any credit for his contributions, and he should because he was the banker on our team who put together that money management system. I'm proud of the fact that he was my professor for Banking 101; I'm not proud of the fact that he gave me a C- grade.

Internally, we had in the Georgia revenue department a consolidation of all tax related activities, and that had happened in Governor Dick Russell's term back in the '30s. So it wasn't necessary to corral all the taxes and put them in the department; they were already there. The one

exception was insurance premium tax, which was in the insurance commissioner's office, and strongly recommended that it stay in the insurance commissioner's office, which to this day it is there in the insurance commissioner's office. But all the other taxes and tax-related activities were already in the Georgia Revenue Department, so we didn't have to pull them all together. On the other hand, as the various taxes had been enacted over the years, sales tax, motor fuel tax, cigarette taxes, liquor taxes, each tax was organized separately, had its own quorums, its own field officers, its own telephones, its own bank account, its own management. In fact, the revenue commissioner was sort of like the CEO of a conglomerate. What we did was reorganize the department internally, a long functional line. We had one processing line that processed all taxes: sales tax, income tax, motor fuel tax, liquor taxes. We had one accounting system that accounted for everything. We had one enforcement system, one audit system. We organized functionally, and we took as our guidelines the Internal Revenue Service. So we reorganized internally. I said at the time the only thing the tax administrators of the various taxes had in common was the revenue commission. Thereafter, when an auditor showed up at your business, he didn't audit just sales tax. He looked at your income tax, motor fuel tax, liquor tax, build tax... When you got a refund you not only got a refund on one tax, you got a refund of all refunds that were due. The functional reorganization, I'm proud to say here 30-something years later, is still in effect in the Georgia Revenue Department. I'm proud of that, and I'm proud of the people within the department that did it.

One thing that I found in working in the State Revenue Commission, there were in fact some people within the department who had been political appointees. They had gotten the job

because the Governor wanted them to have the job. But without exception, there were few of those types that were still there; they were good people, the few that were still there. And the vast majority of the staff were working folks, were part of Governor Maddox's Little People Group. They were real people who enjoyed their work. They came to work, they shuffled the papers properly, they deposited the money properly. And I was very proud to find that the vast majority of people who worked in the department were well motivated, did a good job; and, quite frankly, when we did open heart surgery and created central processing, central audit, central accounting, they all fell in enthusiastically and made it a success. And at the end of the day, we had 12 principal managers. After reorganization, we had the same 12 principal managers. Some of them had different jobs where their talents were better used. But there was no mass firing; there was mass enthusiasm I'm proud to say 35 years later. So our part of state government reorganization was internal as opposed to the balance of it, which was...

When I hear people say, "Well, Governor Carter's reorganization didn't amount to anything," it's still there; it's still functioning. And those criticisms are simply not valid. And I might add Governor Carter and Governor Miller, they won't appreciate me saying this, but they were detail people. They really wanted to know what the result would be of any particular request that I made of them. When I went to them and said "Our property tax laws are outdated, we have local assessors who are not even required to be able to read and write, we need qualified local tax people." When I went to them and said "We have property tax laws that taxes everything, including the furniture in your house is subject to property tax. We want to change that. We want to exempt household goods. We want to require local assessors to be qualified. We want

to improve the property tax, even though it was politically unpopular." Governor Miller, Governor Carter and Governor Maddox all wanted to know how the change affected people. And once they were convinced that it was the right thing to do, they then supported it. I find myself at age 75, Bob, I have a daughter who's interested in things governmental. She's a school teacher. I'm very proud of Elizabeth and my daughter Mary, who's in the retail business. I'm proud of her children's store. But in looking back on it, there's never been a more progressive time in the entire history of this state. They had different personalities, different temperament, but they were all solid, progressive government people. And I was blessed with a wonderful wife, two wonderful children, and I might add three wonderful governors. Different as night and day, but they shared a determination to try to do the right thing.

SHORT: When do you think, John, that Georgia turned the corner?

BLACKMON: We turned the corner in the broadest general sense when Carl Sanders was elected. We started putting the building blocks in place when Governor Maddox was governor. And we started the rebuilding of fundamental state policies with Governor Carter. We finished the job of rebuilding and improving government with Governor Miller. And by the way, I might add, I certainly did not intentionally omit any comment about Governor Joe Frank Harris, same type of governor; progressive, wanted to know what was going on, wanted to get better. Lord knows we're indebted to him for QBE and other initiatives. We were doubly blessed with Governor Busbee, not only because of his ability and his

contributions to state government, but if ever a workhorse was needed following Jimmy Carter's reorganization -- Governor Carter's reorganization was a beautiful blueprint for how to do things better, but it needed a workhorse. It needed someone with hands-on ability to make things work. And we needed George Busbee when he came on as governor. And I bragged about the success of Governor Carter's reorganization; part of that success, indeed maybe all of it, is due in large part to the fact that Governor Busbee implemented all those things, followed up on making it work. Governor Busbee did many memorable things for us. His government record will stand out in my opinion as equal partner with Jimmy Carter's reorganization and government implementation is the way I would put it with Governor Busbee, and Governor Joe Frank Harris is exactly the same.

At one point in time Governor Maddox had political debts that were about to strangle him and his family. Governor Busbee took the initiative and determined that the state of Georgia would not be well served if a former governor was allowed to be embarrassed financially. Accordingly, Governor Busbee organized an informal committee to raise money to pay off Governor Maddox's political debts so he and his family could proceed. The very idea that a governor, sitting governor, would use his stature as an opportunity to assist a former governor, especially one who was somewhat controversial as Governor Maddox was, but supporting his effort, Senator Talmadge, Lieutenant Governor Zell Miller, all of the state leaders, Tommy Irvin, came together to form a committee at Governor Busbee's request, and I'm very proud of the fact that Governor Busbee asked me to be the administrator. I was the chairman of that -- not chairman; I was the working fellow with that committee. I was asked to be the staff person. And to see

politicians in a totally unselfish way, I have this mental image of the dinner in the Farmer's Market when we announced that we had raised the money to retire the debt, and I found myself standing on the stage with Zell Miller, George Busbee, Tommy Irvin, it choked me up, Bob, it really did. I was very proud of my friends that night.

SHORT: John, if I may, I would like to ask you this personal question: Since you were very close to both Governor Maddox and Governor Carter, what position did you take when those two individuals had a feud for years over issues in state government?

BLACKMON: Bob, as a matter of fact, at the end of the Maddox administration, of the 12 or 14 department heads, there were only two that carried over to the Carter administration; and I'm proud of the fact that I was one of those two. The other one was the Commissioner of Industry and Trade, a great American, General Lou Truman. Being a general officer, General Truman did not perform routine administrative functions, he was a general officer. So that left me as the one common friend between the two governors. I'm proud of the fact that I, on occasion, was asked to help communicate between the two groups, between Lieutenant Governor Maddox and Governor Carter. I was never part of a policy-making decision where I was called upon, Bob, to side with the lieutenant governor. I was obviously siding with the governor. I mean, I was working for the governor. And Governor Maddox, having been governor, respected my loyalty to Governor Carter. He didn't fault me because I was loyal to Governor Carter. So I didn't participate in any substantive policy, Bob, political positions as between the two men. What I

did was strictly staff stuff. I would take a message when asked, especially when the press reports might have been misleading, when the press reports may have been more antagonistic than the reality was.

When I could take a message as between the two staff positions and help calm the waters, I not only was available to do it, I was glad to do it. Speaking specifically, on one occasion there was a question in 1971 whether the matter was going to be called for a vote in the Senate. As you may remember, it was a two-part procedure. In '71 authorization was given; the governor was allowed to go do the reorganization, brought it back in '72. The General Assembly could approve or disprove, vote it up or down. In '71, it was critical to get a vote in the Senate. And I don't think I'm breaching any confidences at this point in time by saying that the report in the paper was that Governor Maddox and his colleagues were not going to call it for a vote. Well, it turns out historically that that was not the case; they did in fact call it for a vote.

There was some unanswered questions, legitimate questions. I was able to take those questions to get satisfactory answers. The bill was called. That was the sort of thing that I was incidentally involved in and very proud to have been involved.

SHORT: Close vote.

BLACKMON: Passed by one vote. That's about as close as you can get to the bone.

SHORT: But it passed.

BLACKMON: But it passed.

SHORT: And was enacted and signed. Before I leave, John, I want to point out, and I'm sure you know this. But during your watch, those years as revenue commissioner, the state reached a new landmark in revenue corrections, \$1 billion.

BLACKMON: 1971 as I recall, the first year of the Carter administration.

SHORT: Was that growth?

BLACKMON: The state lived on growth. The state sales tax was enacted thanks to Governor Talmadge, 1952. It wasn't changed, up from 3 to 4 percent, until about 1982. During my tenure, it's fair to say the state lived on growth. And part of my job, second only to collecting taxes, was to assist with industrial development, get people to come to the state, build a facility, employ people, provide jobs. I'm very proud of such facilities as the Proctor & Gamble plant in Albany. So industrial development was the number two item for the tax man. The final go-or-no-go decision for every business is "What about taxes?" "How much have I got to pay?" Our experience was good business management, didn't want tax favoritism; they wanted tax stability. They wanted to be able to anticipate and plan for any tax changes. And I might add, I don't want to reminisce to be in the posture of criticizing current 2008 state government management, but

it's fair to say I think that that degree of stability, that slow change that is good for business development, unfortunately we get a lot of loose talk nowadays.

The difference between getting real progress – let me share a story with you about Buck Melton. Mayor Melton was one of my favorite mayors.

SHORT: Mayor of Macon.

BLACKMON: Mayor of Macon. And by the way, I'll also tell you a story about the day "Machine Gun" Ronnie Thompson came to see me. But fortunately, he didn't bring a machine gun, but he was not happy with the state revenue commissioner. And I never will forget he had a lapel pin with a machine gun. He was the only fellow who ever got mad at me and came to see me with a machine gun.

But what I started to say was you do have to be flexible with your tax structure. You have to be willing to talk to people to find out what their concerns are. And let me give you an example, speaking of Mayor Melton. We were negotiating to get the Brown & Williamson plant in Macon. We were down to the last nickel on that project. Went to the Hilton Hotel down in Macon. Mayor Melton and I met with the Brown & Williamson people. And the only remaining problem, they had to store the tobacco and age it for five years, five or six years, before they could make cigarettes. While it was in storage, it was being taxed. They couldn't manufacture it. They had to let it sit there, but they had to pay property tax on it.

So I kept saying, "Well, we'll give you something of equal benefit because this is a constitutional

equalization matter that I can't do administratively." And Buck Melton and I'll never forget he spoke up and said, "oh, John, you and I will amend the state constitution; thank you very much, we'll exempt your tobacco and you can locate your plant." My mouth fell open. We shook hands, and they left. And I told him, I said, "Mr. Melton, do me a favor: If you're ever again going to promise that I can amend the state constitution, let me know in advance." But in fact, I also told him I appreciated the confidence and I thought, with Governor Carter's help, we could do it. And in fact, the stored tobacco aging was exempted. The plant was built, and the rest, as they say, is history.

SHORT: And you mentioned Ronnie Thompson. First of all, let's tell who Ronnie Thompson is. He was mayor of Macon; he was a candidate for governor and a friend of yours.

BLACKMON: Well, with the exception of that one day when he was displeased with one of my rulings. But he was typical of the local dynamic people, John Rousakis, Sam Massell, Ivan Allen Jr, they were some remarkable local leadership. And I've already commented on the quality of – we had some fine republicans back in those days. That breed is not very evident nowadays. But Ronnie Thompson, on one occasion we were challenged with conduct at Tybee Island, Savannah Beach. There were nine establishments down there, and all nine of them were disabusing the local military guys. The guys from Fort Stewart would go out and have a few beers, and they weren't being treated right. Pleaded with them to take care of the young troops, they wouldn't do it. So I felt it was necessary, and I revoked all nine liquor licenses and left

them out of business for about six weeks. To say that John Rousakis was unhappy would be a gross understatement. John Rousakis, good Greek American, was, suffice it to say, not happy with his revenue commissioner. Years later I was on the red carpet tour. We stopped, we were riding in the bus with all of our out-of-town business prospects. And Rousakis takes advantage of a captive audience to say what a crazy revenue commissioner he had and put all his folks out of business. And I reminded him, I said, "John, think about it this way: I put them back in business." And sure enough, we did. They were all nine revoked, but only temporarily. There was something in the air for government impersonality. To have had one Zell Miller or one Jimmy Carter or one George Busbee or one of those people, or one John Rousakis, it would have been remarkable. But they were everywhere. That was the political generation that the stars fell on, Bob; they literally did. There wasn't a loser in the bunch, and I was very lucky to get to work with them.

SHORT: Are there any John Rousakis's, Zell Miller's, and George Busbee's out there now?

BLACKMON: I'm sure there are, but I would be hard pressed to identify them. I think they're out there, but there's not been any local legislative governmental progress made recently in my opinion.

SHORT: Well, let's turn to party politics. You were chairman of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party at that point seemed to be losing a little of its steam. What was happening

then?

BLACKMON: Well, when you are at the top of your game, when you have made every improvement that very smart people could identify in the system, when you've taken all the slack out of the money in state government for the benefit of the government, when you have balanced out your tax system, when you have dealt with integration – and, by the way, one of the governors I worked with, Bob, I'm very proud to say, was Governor Ernest Vandiver. I was in the Georgia Air National Guard; when I was reappointed by Governor Carter, I went down and tendered my resignation as an air crew navigator for the squadron because I wasn't going to have time to be flying around the world with the military reserve. But appointed at that time as adjutant general was Ernie Vandiver. Governor Vandiver called me up and said, "John, I understand you're resigning from the flying squadron." He said "do me a favor. I've got a spot for a JAG, a judge advocate, on my state staff. It's never been filled, but I think I need a lawyer on my state staff, will you take that position?" And I was very flattered, and I love the Air Guard. And I was glad to have something to do with it that didn't take me out of town a month at a time.

So I took the position as a staff judge advocate. I didn't get to work with Governor Vandiver. He only stayed adjutant general a brief period of time. He resigned to run for the vacant seat when Dick Russell had passed away, and that was the election, by the way, in which Sam Nunn was elected. And by the way, speaking of star performance, speaking of capable people, Lord knows Sam leads anyone's list in that regard.

But getting back to the Georgia Air National Guard, I went on the state staff. And Governor Vandiver was quite right; there was a great need for legal assistance on the state staff. There were issues that were being raised that had never been raised before. And I'm proud that in my seven years until I retired that I stayed on the state staff for Governor Vandiver as adjutant general. But he quit to run for the Senate. But you asked about the Democratic Party. Whether it was the National Guard with Governor Vandiver, state tax matter, integration, whatever the issues, they had always been addressed, maybe not permanently, but they were all under control. And my view of things was the Democratic Party was at the top of its game. And the Democratic leadership was at the top of its game. Unfortunately, we had a lot of the minority of the Democratic members of the legislature. There were some who were subject to being challenged, but we were at the top of our game. And quite frankly, the only way we had to go was down. And those people who were not so progressive in the suburbs, particularly in the Atlanta suburbs, they started losing. And as I've said earlier, I refuse to voice an opinion of the current Republican leadership. That's not for me at this point to become involved with. But suffice it to say, the only way the Democratic Party had to go was down. When I was asked to serve as party chairman, the objectives were threefold: Number one, to elect Max Cleland, which we did; number two, to stop the rate of loss so as to maintain control of the state legislature, which we did in '96, and we did in '98. And in fact, we did in 2000. It was only after elected democrats started switching parties starting in 2000, Bob, actually, starting in 2002, that we finally lost absolute control.

I was looking forward to a republican leadership of the quality of a Bob Bell, a Mike Egan, Jim

Tysinger, Oliver Bateman; we didn't get that. We got less than that quality of a replacement. Now, the Democratic Party when I was chairman, my election was '96, and one of the most remarkable things that ever happened to this little guy from Columbus, Georgia, Bob, I got a message that I was wanted to go with a group of party leaders to the White House to meet with President Clinton, talk about the '96 election. That was his second term. And I'm obviously very proud of being included in that group. I went to talk to him with the then mayor of Macon. You're talking about "Are there good local people? Your darn right there are, if we can find them and get them to run." But Jim Marshall I'm proud to say was one of our success stories in '96. We got Jim Marshall elected mayor of Macon, and of course he went on and is now in the Congress. But when asked to come to Washington and talk to the President, I thought it was a practical joke. You know, I thought "Bob Short is putting me on here, you know, something's going on." But it turned out sure enough they wanted me, along with Jim Marshall and Calvin Smyre to come to Washington, sit around a table and talk with the President. You talk about enriching a lifetime. That kind of experience, Bob, as you know from your experience, will enrich a lifetime.

The Democratic Party invested a little bit of Bill Clinton's time. He came to Georgia twice. He asked if he could carry this state. We told him he could if he would campaign and no surprise issues came up. He campaigned. A surprise issue did come up. There were charges of a lot of Chinese money being contributed to Clinton that came up a week before the election. In my personal opinion, it was that controversy that caused him not to carry the state. But he came within an eyelash of carrying the state. That could have made a great difference to us. And

don't believe that what happens on the national level is not important in Georgia. Believe me, Bob, it is. What happens on the national level of necessity, it may filter down and be this big, but the impact when it filters down is going to be something on the political scale. It will either help local democrats and republicans or it will hurt local democrats and republicans. And if I had one plea to make to my democratic friends, it would be to insist that the state of Georgia always be in play on national elections.

The one thing I am most proud of that I did in the '96 election, the number one priority then was the congress. The Republicans had taken the majority of the seats. In my opinion, they were vulnerable. They were brand new. They were untested. And quite frankly, we were able to recruit an 18-year veteran of the National Rifle Association, a true Christian conservative named Charlie Watts to run for...Watts, am I?

SHORT: Charlie Watts, yeah.

BLACKMON: Charlie Watts. We recruited a candidate in middle Georgia, a helicopter pilot shot down not once but twice in Vietnam. In middle Georgia we were able to recruit a B-52 pilot, graduate of a military academy. We had the most outstanding group of challengers to the newly elected republican congressmen, and we didn't unseat a single one of them. That to me was the biggest single disappointment of my tenure. We had the better candidates, but it simply was not our year. Remember, we had only marginal support for the national party. Governor Miller's right: If they want to be a national party, they better get down here and be a player in

Georgia, the Democratic National Party had, for what it's worth. That's an old guy's opinion.

SHORT: Did you agree with Senator Miller's book?

BLACKMON: Yes, I did. I certainly did. And I had told my democratic friends to get off their duff and read the book and talk about those emotional issues. We have no conflict with it, Bob. All of the leadership that I have talked about here with you today, all of that leadership were leaders in their respective churches, communities. On the issues that Senator Miller raised in his book, all of the leadership I've talked about with you today fell right in with that concept. We have no quarrel. We have no leadership that's opposed to God and country, for heaven's sake.

SHORT: Well, John, some disenchanted democrats feel the state party is too urban and too minority and labor union controlled. Do you think that's a handicap to the party?

BLACKMON: Of course it is. I don't think the feelings are justified, but I can acknowledge that there are such feelings there. And we need a ring master. We need someone who can bring those different elements together, and it can be done. But it will take someone of the stature of the people we've talked about here today in order to pull that off.

SHORT: There was a time I think when Tom Murphy had put together a good coalition of those people we're talking about in the House of Representatives. And they worked hard for the

Democratic Party. Of course, there's no Tom Murphy today. Is there another Tom Murphy?

BLACKMON: Yes, but so far unidentified. We have candidates who could qualify. I am not universally unhappy with the Democratic Party's leadership. It sort of broke me up yesterday. I pulled out the old final report, Bob, that I wrote for the General Assembly after five years, I was leaving state government actually. It was a 10 or 12-page single-spaced beauty. And I thought to myself, "well you bozo, you're probably the only guy that ever read that report." But I am a detail type person when motivated. And we need someone who, like Zell Miller, like Jimmy Carter, like George Busbee, like Joe Frank Harris, will look at the details, will work at it. And I would hope that there will be a new beginning. I'm not going to comment on the current Presidential race, but this new beginning concept is what the democrats need. But we don't need a new beginning to repeat all the old mistakes. We need to make it double-dog day certain that we're patriotic and we're religious and we're family. We're opposed to high taxes. We balance budgets. You talk about balancing budgets, every one of these people – Lester Maddox, Jimmy Carter, Joe Frank Harris – all of them balanced budgets. They all cut taxes. Governor Miller, in addition to the sales tax exemption for food, he gave amendments to the state income tax law, Bob, that gave huge relief. The biggest single tax reduction in state history came from Zell Miller on the state income tax for ordinary folks walking around. They got the biggest reduction in the history in state taxes. So our record of balancing budgets, cutting taxes, we ought to get Zell Miller to come to the democratic convention and explain how to balance budgets and cut taxes and be a churchman and be a patriot.

As a matter of fact, I'll suggest to him that; I'd like Zell to come talk to this year's Democratic National Commission. And by the way, one thing I haven't talked about, Bob, we changed the taxation of airlines and banks and a few other incidentals, you know, utilities and so forth. The one group I had not alienated was the hospitality group. In fact, I had not only not alienated them, I had befriended them in trying to deal with hotel/motel taxes to the advantage of the industry. So there was the one business group that I had not alienated, and they were nice enough to hire me to work with them.

And just as I was lucky when I came around first in state government to have all these great opportunities to meet wonderful people doing great things, in my private practice I was equally lucky. My principal clients were Marriotts and Hyatts and convention bureaus. While I was in state government, the idea of the Georgia World Congress Center was first put forward, Bob. And there was great controversy in the legislature: "We're not going to spend all this money to build this big thing in Atlanta; why don't we build it in Blairsville." So there was great controversy about the Georgia World Congress Center.

Governor Carter put together a team of which I was pleased to be the bureaucrat member for. We had people like Bubba McDonald who was chairman of the House Tourism Committee. We had Paul Brown, Paul Brown, Sr.

SHORT: Senator Brown.

BLACKMON: Senator Brown, chairman of the senate committee. But the World Congress

Center was a challenge. So we traveled all around the state, and that was my first contribution. But if anyone had told me that coming out of that effort to build the World Congress Center that we would have one of the world's largest, most productive conference centers in the world right here in Atlanta, if anyone had told me that we would have the Democratic National Convention, if anyone had told me that we were going to have the Olympics all right here, if anyone had told me we were going to have Turner Television right here in Atlanta, all of which is a product of the hospitality industry, and I would be greatly at fault if I didn't talk about Spurgeon Richardson, who came on board with the Atlanta Convention Bureau. And Spurgeon went out and made this city the convention city that it is.

And when I worked on projects like the co-op program where it said "Atlanta Prefers Visa", can you believe that was extremely controversial? We had to fight with Billy Payne and Horace Sibley because Visa wanted to do a deal with the Convention Bureau that said "Atlanta Prefers Visa". Well, we had to compromise up front, but nowadays there's a program there. And when you see Atlanta Prefers Visa, think of Spurgeon Richardson; think of Ernie Davis and Dan Graveline, the two people who have run that congress center. Dan, by the way, I'm sure you remember, is Carl Sanders' son-in-law. And it appears that Dan picked up a lot of good work habits from his father-in-law. But I'm proud of the hospitality group, proud of my work with them. They were nice enough to recently give me a hall of fame lifetime achievement award. I went home and told Connie I said, "well, I have the lifetime award here; I guess now I can just hang it up and don't have to do anything else."

SHORT: John, did you ever consider running for public office?

BLACKMON: Yes, I did and I gave it serious thought. My two predecessors, both Peyton Hawes and Hiram Undercofler, had gone on to be Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court. I had never been in private practice. I'm very proud of the fact that the governors I worked for asked if I was interested. I don't know if they would have appointed me to the court, but I'm very proud of the fact that they at least asked if I was interested. And I had to think about it because, as a lawyer, serving on the highest court in the state is quite an honor. But I had to realize that after five years of making decisions I really respected the work that judges do but I'd had enough decision-making to last two lifetimes. So I found myself disappointed in giving an honest answer, which was, "No thank you, Governor; I've never been in private practice, and I don't think it's quite the thing to do to appoint me to the court, thank you very much." And I really was very honored that they asked. I don't know if they would have, but at least they asked if I was interested.

SHORT: We haven't talked about that period in your life between the time that you left government and became chairman of the party and done all these other things. What did you do during that period?

BLACKMON: Practice law right here with this law firm, Smith, Gambrell & Russell. And, by the way, that firm has been extremely supportive of me, my family, my career. Bob, what I did

was I worked with the state chamber. I was on the state chamber board; worked with the red carpet tour, which is a business development tour, and I did that for 21 years when I first left state service. I represented great taxpayers. I often said there was no doubt who the good guys were at my practice. It was me and my God-fearing taxpaying client versus the bad tax collector. There was no question about who the good guys were. And I enjoyed representing the taxpayers. And I'm extremely proud of the fact that my practice, Bob, was a transactional practice. That is they've got a tax problem and they come see you. They didn't come to me to be general counsel of Turner Broadcasting, but they did come to me with a tax problem. They didn't come to me to be a lawyer for Trust Company Bank, but they did come to me with a tax problem. And I handled tax problems with people that I'm extremely proud of having been asked by people like the Trust Company, Ted Turner, Lanier Business Products, and, by the way, I'm not breaching any client confidencies here, these are matters that quite often were on the public record that I was representing them. But what I did was I represented some great clients, some great people, had occasion to meet Ted Turner, had occasion to meet and work with Bernie Marcus. So my timing for a law career, I was just as lucky as I was in my public career.

**SHORT:** You had a great career, John. What was your biggest accomplishment?

**BLACKMON:** I'd have to give you two answers because I've had two careers. During my time in state government I think our biggest success was putting into place a money market and accountability section of the law to manage the state's finances. I think that was the most

significant thing I've worked on of a permanent benefit to the state. On the private side, my work with the hospitality industry, particularly working with the hotel/motel tax. We not only had to get the tax authorized, Bob, and the tax went from 3 percent to 5 percent to 8 percent to 9 percent, but the tax also, a portion of it that I worked on in great detail, up all night sweating, drafting bills, it's helped fund the Georgia World Congress Center. The hotel/motel tax has helped fund the Georgia Dome. It helped fund the Democratic Convention in '88. It helped fund the Olympics in '96. So the single most important thing that I ever worked on in private industry was the hotel/motel tax, and trying to ensure that it was properly used to support the tourism and convention business and the jobs that it provided.

SHORT: Your biggest disappointment?

BLACKMON: My biggest single disappointment was the failure to elect those true, true American heroes to the United States Congress in 1996. Those people should have been elected. They were quality people. They were true heroes. They were true Georgia heroes; they were true American heroes. And I will always regret that we did not elect them. We started some careers that subsequently caught up with the system, such as Jim Marshall, but that was the biggest personal disappointment.

SHORT: John Blackmon, thank you very much for being with us today on Reflections on Georgia Politics.

BLACKMON: Well, you're very kind to let me ramble on about my favorite subject, which is me.

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John Blackmon**

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