

Michael Thurmond interviewed by Bob Short

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BOB SHORT: Hello. I'm Bob Short and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Richard Russell Library at the University of Georgia. Our guest today is

Michael Thurmond, Georgia's Labor Commissioner who has distinguished himself as an attorney, as an author, as a lecturer, and as a public servant. Welcome, Commissioner; we are delighted to have you.

MICHAEL THURMOND: Thank you. Delighted to be here.

SHORT: We know you and we think that you're very established public servant and we're delighted to have your life on our program. You were born in Athens, one of nine children.

THURMOND: Yes. Actually, I was born near Athens in the Sandy Creek Nature Center, which is now the Sandy Creek Nature Center, but at that time it was just a rural part of Clarke County known as the Sandy Creek area. And my father was Sydney Thurmond, my mother was Vanilla Burton Thurmond and they farmed the land which now encompasses that nature center. They were tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and we worked those fields. My first conscious memory is really being in a cotton field as a baby, a young toddler, watching my parents and my brothers and sisters as they worked the fields, picking cotton.

SHORT: And you went to elementary and high school there in Clarke County.

THURMOND: I did. I attended Lyons Elementary School which is next to Ben Epps Field. It's now the National Guard Armory. From there, I spent one year at North Athens Elementary

School and returned to Lyons Junior High School where Mr. Howard Straud was my principal. And then on to Burney-Harris High which was the all black high school. I attended all black segregated schools until my senior year and then we transferred to what became Clarke Central High School. And that was 1971. I was a member of the first graduating class of Clarke Central High.

SHORT: Good. And then to college?

THURMOND: And then on to college, Paine College in Augusta, Georgia where I graduated in 1975, majored in philosophy and religion, became very active in student politics. I was a freshman class president, editor of the student newspaper and served as president of the student body my junior and senior year and graduated with honors. And after that I went over to Columbia, South Carolina and attended the University of South Carolina School of Law, graduated in 1978, passed the bar that same year, returned to Athens to begin to practice law.

SHORT: Well, with a degree in philosophy and religion and law you chose to be a public servant. Why not a minister or an educator?

THURMOND: Great question. My mother actually really, really wanted me to a minister and encouraged me to go off Paine College which was noted for producing preachers and teachers. And I was the only person majoring in philosophy and religion who really did not become a

minister. And I remember close to graduation my senior year and even though I qualified to graduated I still hadn't received the call and I thought I needed to probably let my parents know before they showed up for graduation that I was not going into the ministry but decided to pursue law. I called home and told my mother and the phone went silent and she was devastated and then I heard her tell my dad that Mike's going to law school and not into the ministry because he didn't get the call. And my daddy, I can still hear his voice today saying, Well, he got the call but he was just out partying somewhere and didn't answer the phone.

But the background in philosophy and religion was great preparation for law school and particularly philosophy teaches you how to think not necessarily what to think. And religion, of course, or the Bible is a legal document, it's a book of laws, spiritually based, and so, it has been excellent preparation for a life in politics, the religion, the philosophy, and the law.

SHORT: You know, I found out something about you that I'll bet you very few people know.

And that is you were the 100 yard dash champion in college.

THURMOND: No, in high school.

SHORT: High school.

THURMOND: In high school, at Clarke Central High. I was the co-holder of the record for a few years and played athletics in high school, too. It was quite a time of ferment. Right now a

gentleman called me earlier last week, he's writing a book on the disturbances and the demonstrations we had my junior year, which was the spring of 1970, '71 that preceded the consolidation of Burney-Harris and Athens High School into one high school which was Clarke Central. And that was quite a time and the first time that blacks and whites had participated in athletic events or, you know, at the public schools in Clarke County had been segregated for 84 years. And I often look back on there as a unique time. It was a great opportunity for leadership and it was a time of conflict but it was also a time of growth and new opportunities and new realities really.

SHORT: Well you were a leader of your students at that time. I'm sure that you had definite ideas on how the county should proceed in integrating their schools.

THURMOND: Looking back on it, we actually had a vision to kind of extended beyond our very young age of 17 and 18. What we were fighting for was to have not just our school consumed by Athens High, but in fact, to create a new system that included both of the high schools, institution that recognized the history and heritage of Athens High and Burney-Harris. And although there were some difficult times, I did lead the demonstrations and my first day in court occurred as a result of that. Judge James Barrow issued a restraining order to stop the demonstrations and required us to appear in his courtroom. And I know I was scared. I just knew I was going to prison for the rest of my life. And it was quite a time and some people I met, Judge Barrow, Denny Galis, who became the city attorney who when I returned to law

school I was his assistant city attorney, actually represented us in the hearing that day.

SHORT: Okay. So you came back to Athens, you began practicing law. The only, as I understand it, black owned law firm in the county at that time.

THURMOND: Well we were the second law firm. There was one other gentleman who actually practiced law, Ken Dyers, but we had a law firm ultimately grew to five members. But one year before I started practicing I did work as assistant city attorney. Former mayor Upshaw Bentley who was the mayor then, I went in to see Mayor Bentley after I got out of law school and I think impressed him because right on the spot he told me that he's going to hire to become the new assistant city attorney and I should report to work first thing Monday morning with Denny Galis who was the assistant city attorney over on Prince Avenue. And so, I show up at Denny Galis's office, he looks at me like who are you? And he was confused. He told me to step back out in the waiting room. I heard him on the phone calling Mayor Bentley. Well what happened was Mayor Bentley had hired me but he forgot to tell Denny Galis. So I showed up to a job that didn't exist. And anyway, they accommodated me and assigned me to Mr. Johnny Fowler who was the city clerk then. My first big job as assistant city attorney was to clean out the vault that's in the old Athens City Hall. And it had dust and grime all on it, so that's how I started my legal career, in the vault at Athens City Hall.

SHORT: But at that point you were well known and well respected because shortly thereafter

you were elected to the Georgia House of Representatives, the first African American since God knows when.

THURMOND: Since reconstruction. But yeah, that was in 1986. I came back in '78, '79 and '86 I finally got elected. However, there were a couple of elections that took place prior to my winning where I was actually defeated. I first ran in 1982 against a fine gentleman, Hugh Logan, who passed a few years ago, defeated in '82. I ran again in 1984. I lost again. And finally, on the third try in 1986 I finally was elected to the Georgia House.

SHORT: You served as a member, as I recall, of a three member district for the county.

THURMOND: Well, yes, myself, Lawton Stephens was also one of the representatives from there, and Paul Brown was our State Senator, the late Paul Brown, and he was a mentor to me. And just going back, looking at those elections though, and it bears because not only was I the first African American since reconstruction but more importantly, when I was elected in '86 I was the only African American who represented a majority white district. In Georgia, and at that time in the south we couldn't find any other African American who was serving and had been elected from a majority white district.

SHORT: Well, as a freshman member of the House it's not unusual to find a newly elected representative to look to the older heads for guidance and direction. Did you have a mentor?

THURMOND: Well, yes, and you know it was a unique environment because Representative Logan had been much respected and a close ally of Speaker Murphy, and having defeated him, that was a real question mark. And so, actually I reached out to Paul Brown being number one and the one person who helped me a lot was actually Chapel Matthews, Representative Chapel Matthews. I don't know whether you remember –

SHORT: I remember Chapel very well.

THURMOND: Oh, yeah.

SHORT: We used to call him Mr. University.

THURMOND: Oh, yes, he loved the University. And then going back, let me retrogress a few years back. The summer that I was getting ready to go off to law school we had worked on the farm and my daddy saved as much money as we could and myself working with him but we didn't have enough. And I pinned all of my hopes of paying for law school on a Thurgood Marshall – no, the Earl Warren Scholarship and I didn't get it. And so, my dad who had known Representative Matthews for decades said we got to go see Mr. Chapel, which is what he called him, and to tell him about our situation, how we need some money. Well, Representative Matthews, first time I ever met him personally, said well you go on over there. Go on off to law

school and I'll make a call and tell them to go ahead and admit you and we'll see what we can do about getting you some additional money. Well I went on off to Carolina and Columbia, and about three to four weeks later I got a letter from Earl Warren saying that now you've been awarded that scholarship. I don't really know what Representative Matthews did, but to this day – it was \$800 – I believe that he made the contribution that turned into that scholarship that paid for that first year of law school for me.

SHORT: Do you remember the first legislative bill you ever introduced?

THURMOND: Exactly. Of course I do. It was tax credit. It was a low income tax credit. It turned out to be one of the biggest political fights. I ended up in the middle of a fight between Tom Murphy and Zell Miller. Of all the people you don't want to get up in the middle of is Tom Murphy and Zell Miller and a big political fight. And it revolved around the food exemption. What I did was after my first term I wanted to be on Ways and Means because I knew that was the way. I knew appropriations was a bridge too far but I thought I might be able to start making a name for myself by getting on Ways and Means. It was unusual. Young black legislator, big, and Speaker Murphy told me he wouldn't let me – he said no. And we were at the Biennial Institute at the University of Georgia and I guess that was in '89, yeah, January '89. I went into Speaker's hotel room that night over at the Georgia Center. And he had been out all evening shaking hands and politicking and Lou Nell, who was his secretary, she was the nicest and I said "Let me in, I just want to talk." I never will forget that. He was sitting on the edge of the bed in

his underwear and I said "Mr. Speaker, you got to let me on Ways and Means" and I stayed there about a hour and finally he said "Damn it, Michael, I'm sleeping. Okay, you on the committee." And so I got on Ways and Means and then I filed this tax credit bill. And so, Zell Miller, who was then a Lieutenant Governor, wanted to exempt all foods from the sales tax. And it was moving ahead. Then all of the sudden Georgia hit this huge downturn. And so, we couldn't afford it because we were in a recession. It was like '89, '90 recession. And the Speaker was supporting my tax credit. Zell Miller was opposing it, I was in the middle. And this went on through two legislative sessions. And one day I got up, came to the General Assembly and somebody said Zell, he was governor then – looking for you. Actually, when did Zell get to be elected governor? Was it –

SHORT: '90.

THURMOND: '90.

SHORT: Yeah.

THURMOND: So '91 would have been January, right?

SHORT: Uh-huh, yeah.

THURMOND: That January. Said "The governor looking for you." "Oh my God, what the governor want? " And then I went to the office and they said "Governor want to take you to lunch. You just meet him out at his car." So we go to the Commerce Club and on the way over there in the car he said, "Mike, I tell you what, I'm going with your plan." See, cause my plan cost about \$60 million and he didn't have the money to finance his plan which was \$400 million so he pulled back during the recession and that bill became law. And since then we've generated well over \$200 million in tax credit to low income Georgians and senior citizens. It's still on the book to this day. Now eventually Governor Miller got his sales tax. But that really is what made me in the House, because I became a hero in the House and kind of solved that big crisis and then, as they say, I was on my way.

SHORT: Good. What were your other interests?

THURMOND: In the legislature?

SHORT: In the legislature.

THURMOND: Well basically that was it. I worked the six years I was there I spent about four years working on that bill. And I was interested in education and also in children's issues and adoption. I served on adoption study committee, a particularly as it related to special needs children. And I worked with Jim Ledbetter over Department of Human Resources which proved

to be an opportunity that presented itself later in my career and we were able to pass new adoption laws that allow special needs children, children that might have a disability, minority children who obviously find it more difficult to get adopted. We streamlined the process and opened the door for more adoptions of special needs children.

SHORT: Somewhere along the line you took time out and ran for Congress.

THURMOND: Yes.

SHORT: Would you tell us about that.

THURMOND: 1992, that was – in '90 I also became Chairman of the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus. And that was right during the reapportionment period. And the Democrats at that point were still in power, still controlled the House and Senate, and as I recall Newt Gingrich was the only Republican Congressman. Seemed like a long time ago, right?

SHORT: It does. Yes, it does.

THURMOND: But that was 1990 and Cynthia Mckinney and some of the Black Caucus was split. They had promoted what was called a Max-Black plan which would have created a maximum number a majority black district. I opposed the plan and came under intense criticism

because I felt that if we implemented the Max-Black plan it would really create more opportunities for Republicans, it would create more all white districts, and by doing that it would ultimately undermine Democratic power and control in the General Assembly, and in Congress. I lost that battle. It went to the Supreme Court. I lost that battle and the plan was put in place and then after that session I decided to run for Congress. That issue, my lack of support for the Max-Black plan became a big issue in the congressional race. Cynthia got elected. I came in either dead last or so close to dead last out of five people I could see the bottom. And it was just me and my naivety, my campaign colors were black and white. My thing was there was one white person in the race, DeLoach and there were four blacks. So I thought about since, you know, my Athens orientation I was going to run a campaign built on racial cooperation. I was going to play the middle. And you know in politics they say ain't but one thing in the middle of the road, right. A dead possum. That's all.

SHORT: That's right.

THURMOND: That's the only thing out in the middle of the road. So, I got waxed. I always said looking back on that '92 campaign I wasn't black enough for the black voters and I wasn't white enough for the white voters, and so I ended up just wiped out and seemingly, my career was over in terms of elected politics.

SHORT: But it wasn't.

THURMOND: It wasn't. In the summer of '94 I came home and I was back in Athens practicing law again. Because I was in political exile which is back to Athens and my dream of politics was over. I come home to my little condo there on Oglethorpe Avenue, Sunset Drive, and have a message saying want to talk to you, I'm calling on behalf of Governor Miller about becoming the Director of the Department of Family and Children Services. It was Jim Ledbetter. And I'm like "What?" You know, I knew it about it, so, I called him and heck, we went to see Governor Miller and what he said, to this day he still says this about me. He said "Now, Michael, you want this job, you sure you want this job? Because you know, the DFACS director is like the armpit of state politics. You go there to die. I mean no one has survived DFACS director. They carry you out of there in a box. It's been that way for 30, 40 years." And he said "Well, you know, there are two types of politicians." He said "There are politicians who get appointed and there's running politicians." And he said "I think you're a running politician." To this day, whenever he sees me he said "you a running politician, I'll tell you that." And I said "No, sir, I'm out of politics, I want this job." So he said okay. September 1994, Mike Thurmond, the new DFACS director for the state of Georgia.

SHORT: And came up with some great programs.

THURMOND: Boy, and I went in to fix child welfare but just at that time welfare reform was becoming a national issue. Newt Gingrich was the Speaker of the House, Bill Clinton was the

president and the Contract for America, all of that was unfolding on the national scene, and there was this tug of war over new welfare reform legislation. And I guess it was the '96 campaign right before Bill Clinton said okay, he signed the bill and all of a sudden welfare reform is the number one issue in America. And it's centered right there at the Department of Family and Children Services. We took it up. When I took office at DFCS there were 160,000 families on "welfare". When I left it had dropped to like 42,000 families. And out of that effort, you know, very successful and I stayed there between '94 and '97 and left there, in the minds of some people, as a hero with having led the effort to reform welfare in Georgia.

SHORT: I don't think there's any question about that. Work First was your big program.

THURMOND: That's right. Work First. And I believe, because my parents always worked. We were dirt poor literally, but they always worked. But I also knew that in the winter time when vegetables weren't growing in the field my parents were forced to receive food commodities through the welfare office. I often tell people now, you know, I literally sat in a welfare office and I grew up to become the director of the Department of Family and Children Services which oversaw the welfare program. And I used to tell my case workers, I said "Be careful how you treat the little children who sit in your waiting rooms because they might grow up to be your boss." And literally, that's what happened. But I wanted to create a program that recognized that there was dignity in work that provided support and assistance for people who wanted to do better. And then, not only encourage them to do better but rewarded people who

believed in the value of honest labor. And you know, looking back at it, that may be – I don't know what else lies out here for me, but clearly, I think that's one of the most significant contributions that I've been able to make in my public life.

SHORT: And then you decided to run for Labor Commissioner.

THURMOND: Well, yeah, but there was one little stop at the University of Georgia at the Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

SHORT: Oh, okay.

THURMOND: That I was over there as a distinguished lecturer. I had to go get my mind back together because I was so stressed out. DFACS, that is the toughest job in state government, being the DFACS director. And after three years I was literally burned out. So that was a great opportunity for me to kind of recalibrate and you know, renew and refresh not just myself emotionally but physically and spiritually as well. But shortly thereafter, I went to Carl Vinson in September. In April I threw my hat in the ring for Labor Commissioner, State of Georgia.

SHORT: Tell us about that race.

THURMOND: It was quite a race because David Pultris had decided to run for governor and all

of the sudden the job opened up. And I thought it was a perfect segue from helping poor people to get jobs to just being responsible for all people and helping them to get jobs. And so, we had a Democratic primary with Steve Henson who was a state senator from DeKalb who's now my state senator at my home in DeKalb, Richard McGee, who is the Deputy Commissioner here at the Department of Labor, and myself. We're in the Democratic primary. I finished first in the primary but had a runoff against Steven Henson and it was a tough runoff but we were able to win it. And then in the November general election I faced a perennial candidate in John Frank Collins who was a Republican nominee.

SHORT: How did you find the department? I recall over the years there had been several directors or commissioners and some questions about commissioners in the past. How did you find the department when you took it over?

THURMOND: Well, we had great people. You know, Sam Caldwell, that had been the huge scandal in the mid 80s when Sam Caldwell, who had been one of the most powerful men in Georgia politics throughout my youth and you know when I was growing up. He had gotten involved in this huge scandal and he ultimately ended up in prison. And there were still some wounds that had not yet been yield. And then some of the succeeding governors had kind of put their hand I think – let's see, it was Pultris and –

SHORT: Marti.

THURMOND: Marti Fullerton. And then there's a Mr. – what his name? Tanner, Joe Tanner.

SHORT: Joe Tanner.

THURMOND: Had served as Labor Commissioner.

SHORT: Right.

THURMOND: And Al Scott –

SHORT: Right.

THURMOND: -- had served briefly but he couldn't get elected. And so, really the Labor Department was a paper and pencil operation. It was operating as it had operated from decades. And you know, there had been challenges and people were still hurt. Because the Labor Department during the Caldwell administration when he was at his apex in power was one of the most influential agencies in state government. And he was one of the most influential players. And it had been, after that, in a very difficult period, although it was moving along, it had no regained its prominence as a department of influence. And so, that's what I found. And many of Sam Caldwell's people, although some of them had been forced out or put in prison, many of the

lower level people were still here.

SHORT: And then you came up with a program called Georgia Works.

THURMOND: Yeah, I'm always coming up with these programs.

SHORT: Yeah.

THURMOND: Georgia Works. It's an innovative approach to helping people just to stimulate job creation. You know, you can wait on the president, you can wait on Congress, you can wait on the Federal Reserve to create jobs. Georgia Works says go out, stimulate your own economy, create your own job. And what it does is for individuals who are receiving unemployment insurance benefits, I can present myself to you as a potential employer and say look, I want to audition for this job. And what's the only way to really know whether a person going to show up on time and do what you ask them to do? They have to actually do it. And so, while they're still receiving unemployment insurance benefits they can spend eight weeks auditioning and if the employer's impressed he or she can hire that person. Right now 60% of the people who are engaged in Georgia Works get a job before eight weeks.

SHORT: Sounds like a good program.

THURMOND: Other states are adopting it. We got a call from Oregon just recently and people have been here from all over the country, our fellow labor department employees, and we're teaching them how to implement the Georgia Works strategy.

SHORT: Well it seems to me there's some similarity between DFACS And the Labor Commissioner's job.

THURMOND: Very much so. Often overlooked is that the unemployment insurance and AFDC as well as Social Security were all part of the Economic Security Act of 1935, post depression. It was part of Roosevelt's strategy to rescue the American economy and millions of Americans who were out of work. So 1935 was the call for Economic Security Act, the Family Security Act included what was then AFDC, unemployment insurance, eventually what became known as Social Security for people of old age, disabled, and their spouses as well as their dependent. So, conceptually, there's a tremendous synergy between the two. One, AFDC (indiscernible) was for individuals who are unemployed but did not have jobs. Whereas the unemployment insurance program helps people who are unemployed who lost their job. That is the significant difference.

SHORT: What is the relationship between the Georgia Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Labor?

THURMOND: Well, actually, we are a federal program administered by a state agency. The Labor Departments were really fully federalized during World War II when there was a shortage of labor and with so many men overseas then it was imperative that here in the states that the workforce was available, the civilian workforce, to build the munitions and the tanks and the trucks. And so, it was federalized so that the federal government could generate the manpower needed to support the soldiers overseas. So we are in fact a federal agency primarily controlled by federal rules and regulations but administered individually by state agency.

SHORT: And funded by the federal government.

THURMOND: Primarily. Ninety percent of my budget, we have about a \$600 million budget. Ninety percent of my budget is funded by federal dollars.

SHORT: You know in some states the Labor Commissioner is appointed. In Georgia it's a constitutional office.

THURMOND: In the great majority of them. I think there are only three states out of the 50 who have elected Labor Commissioners. And right now in the majority of the states there's probably 47 of them it's a gubernatorial appointment. But Georgia, and I think this is really, if you look back at the history of it, it goes back to Sam Caldwell and the fact that he was able to maintain a strong Labor Commissioners post independent from the Governor's Office, and if you look at the

programs within the Georgia Department of Labor, there's really no other state that has a concentration of programs within the Labor Department. We have 4,000 employees and the Labor Department is the largest of the constitutional offices here in Georgia.

SHORT: So you think election is better than appointing?

THURMOND: Oh yes. I think, you know, well if I was governor I'd probably want to appoint somebody. No, I think elected is much better and it provides an independent voice and you know, I get hired by the people. And often tell people, my job interviews occur every four years. And if the people don't hire me I don't have a job. I'm just like any other citizen. I think that creates a more accountable Commissioner's Office.

SHORT: I think you'll agree that this has not been the best time to serve as Labor Commissioner with all the outsourcing of jobs and the resulting problems that you have to face.

THURMOND: Well you know it's interesting. January 1999 when I was sworn in the big issue was the labor shortage. We were at the end of the Clinton administration and we had created so many jobs you couldn't find the people to fill them. And after that, that was the dot com implosion, and then 9/11. And we've got hurricanes. Katrina, 50,000 people came to Georgia, we had to try to manage and get them back to work. You name it. And now it's the credit crunch, four dollar a gallon gas, and I know one day out in the future people are going to look at

that and say man, that was cheap, you know, four dollar a gallon gas. And you know, mortgages, foreclosures. But the only reason the Labor Department exists is that we have to stand in the breach. We are the first responders during times of economic dislocation. You know Bill Clinton once said something that you want challenging times. If you're going to be in a position of responsibility, of public service and authority, you want to be there when the times are tough. You want to be there when the average citizen, today 285,000 Georgians are unemployed. I consider it a privilege to hold this position, and a trust because we are responsible. We are the first responders. The people of Georgia elect me to do this job not just when the times are good, but more importantly, they want somebody they can count on when times are tough, as they are today.

SHORT: Commissioner, for those of us who probably don't know, tell us about your state wide organization of centers for people who need to find work.

THURMOND: As I mentioned, 4,000 employees, \$600 million budget, we have 53 career centers around Georgia arrayed throughout the state. And one of the philosophical and programmatic changes I made was to eliminate what we call unemployment offices, which is people say I'm going to the unemployment office. That was just obsolete in its thought and in its practice. And so, we've created a state of the art, high tech, high touch career centers across the state of Georgia designed to helping Georgians get back to work as quickly as possible. Today, which is July the 21st, 2008, the average length of time it takes to get back to work in America is

15.4 weeks. We get people back to work at 11.3 weeks and that is the shortest duration in the nation. We're number one in the nation in getting people back to work. Six years ago we combined or brought in the Division of Rehabilitation Services whereby all the programs designed to assist individuals with disabilities to get access to employment and training is also within the Georgia Department of Labor, and there are about 50 of those offices. So we have about 100 offices state wide, 4,000 employees. And the blessing I really – you asked about what I found. The one resource that was here that had made all the difference was the people. I've changed very few people. But those same people have rallied to my vision and hopefully to my leadership to really make this one of the most successful labor department in the country.

SHORT: Georgia has several programs for job training.

THURMOND: Correct.

SHORT: How does your department figure in all that?

THURMOND: We oversee the Workforce Investment Act, but there are 20 workforce investment areas around the state that actually provide the training. We have a very close partnership with our technical colleges. One of the things is we don't train. We finance training but we help the product of that training, which are those who graduate from our colleges and technical schools and high schools. We are a labor exchange. We assist those agencies who

train and educate and once that educated training product is completed we become the labor exchange between the job seeker and the employer.

SHORT: Do you think that outsourcing of jobs has hit the bottom here? Can we experience what we've had in the past again in the future?

THURMOND: Well, we will, but I think outsourcing, the globalization of our economy will continue. You know the only people who really believe, or who we advocate that is not going to continue is people running for president maybe and they all lying, we're going to continue. What we're trying to do is build a 21st century employment security system. Our unemployment insurance system has not been overhauled in a major way since it was established in 1935. What we've done in Georgia, at least laid the foundation for the creation of a 21st century employment security system.

Let me tell you what my theory is. You know, the basic theory of globalization is that lower paying jobs will be shipped overseas and higher paying jobs will be created here in America. Now, right now as I speak there is a great debate as to whether or not globalization is actually working or whether it's working to the detriment of the American worker. I believe that the jobs are being created here but we don't have a system that's flexible and efficient enough to help transition those workers in north Georgia who have lost their jobs at the textile mill to retrain them and "upskill" them and then get them prepared and ready and move them into the new job being created. And maybe, which is what I'm advocating, maybe it's not the globalization that's

not working, it's that our employment security system that was designed to address post Depression era employment issues is not equipped and not positioned to function effectively here in the early part of the 21st century. That's what needs to change. That's what I been trying to do here at the Georgia Department of Labor.

SHORT: What effect do immigrants have on our labor situation?

THURMOND: Depending on whom you ask. My friends who are farmers and who raise the onions and the tomatoes the things we put on our table will argue that they are essential, that they cannot do their business in the poultry industry, in the agricultural industry without them. There are others who say of course that they are driving their wages, and forcing low skill American workers into unemployment. What we really need to resolve the issue, if it can be resolved and hopefully next year it will begin to be resolved, is to go ahead and develop a comprehensive immigration reform strategy. It is much needed. And this whole issue about immigration, some people see it as cultural or racial or whatever the case, but really it's a labor issue. It's all about labor. And it's about the pursuit of cheap labor. And you know, my next book that I already got a title for will be called "Cheap Labor", and much of world history has been influenced by the pursuit of cheap labor.

SHORT: Since you mentioned being an author, let's talk a little bit about some of your works.

You've written – what – two or three books?

THURMOND: Well, the first one I wrote I published in '78 when I was graduating from law school. I actually researched and wrote it the three years I was in law school. It's "A Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History". It's a history of prominent African Americans in the life in the legacy of Athens. And my second book which was published in 2004 is entitled "Freedom: Georgia's Anti-slavery Heritage". I began to work on that book in the spring of 1993 after I got beat running for Congress. You know after you get beat you have a lot of time on your hands. People don't call you. Nobody wants to talk to you. And so, while I was over there sad with my wounds I began to read some American classics that I read before but sometimes re-reading books provide more insight. And one of them was the "The Souls of Black Folk" written by W.E.B. DuBois at the beginning of the 20th century. And in one of the chapters he said that Georgia, both now and then, that the Negro problems had always been centered in the state of Georgia. And he wrote this in 1903. And I said "hmm, he couldn't have been talking about the Civil Rights Movement, because Martin Luther King, right, he wasn't born till '29. He couldn't have been talking about (Indiscernible). Why would he write this in the early part of the 20th century?" So I said, "Well let me see." And so that was the beginning of this book.

And it begins really February 12, 1733 are really the events that lead up to that date in American history. Georgia was founded by James Oglethorpe who is a personal hero of mine by the way. And Oglethorpe was an abolitionist. Many people are surprised that Georgia was founded by a man who did not believe in slavery and that he founded Georgia as the only one of the 13

original colonies where slavery was prohibited at its inception. And Oglethorpe fought to maintain the slavery ban for more than 20 years. And so, we start there and we look at Georgia's anti-slavery heritage and we follow it through the colonial period to African Americans who fought with the British during the Revolutionary War because the British offered freedom, the war of 1812 and on up through the Civil War, showing how blacks and whites and Native Americans banded together to fight against slavery. We look at the Seminoles that were in South Georgia was really an integrated tribe of red and black people. Africans would escape from enslavement in the northern part of Georgia and South Carolina and go to the Seminole Nation where they worked and lived with the Seminoles and then into north Florida. And ultimately it was Andrew Jackson who, the great Indian fighter, went into north Florida to defeat the black Seminole and to either drive them out or re-enslave them. So the history is about that.

And so the ultimate thesis is that if you look back at Georgia history then the Civil Rights Movement could have been born – Martin Luther King, this could occur nowhere else but in the state of Georgia. Because you had men, you know, we talk about Ivan Allen and Jimmy Carter and Carl Sanders, they were white leaders who were progressive in their era but that didn't really begin with Ivan Allen or Carl Sanders or Ellis Arnold. It really began with James Oglethorpe. Georgia, from its inception has had a succession of progressive white leaders, as well as progressive African Americans who understood the value of equality and freedom. So that's kind of what my book details.

SHORT: That's very interesting. Is it available?

THURMOND: Yes, it's out of print now. We sold, and I'm proud that the Georgia Historical Society recognized it as the Lilla Hawes Book of the Year award and the Georgia Center for the Book included it as one of the 25 books all Georgians should read. We sold out. And I'm in discussion now to hopefully get a second edition printed.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about the Civil Rights Movement. Did you have a relationship with Dr. King?

THURMOND: No, I did not know him. I was in the ninth grade when he was killed.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Hosea Williams?

THURMOND: I met him. He came to Athens when we were having our demonstration. You know, obviously after I came to Atlanta I got to know him. His wife served in the legislature with me and I've spent some time with him and many other civil rights leaders, Ralph David Abernathy, Dr. Joseph Lowery, Tyrone Brooks. These are people I developed a relationship in my adult years, you know, long after, though, they were engaged in the Civil Rights Movement itself.

SHORT: I'm glad you mentioned those names. I wanted to ask you, if you will, about some of

the people that you worked with and knew in the legislature.

THURMOND: Okay.

SHORT: Tom Murphy.

THURMOND: Very much so. Went to his funeral. He was a friend and supporter. He helped pave the way for my career. He gave me the right committee assignments, allowed me to be in positions of influence and authority and supported me. His son worked here for a while and his family, you know, I consider them friends, and attended his funeral a few months back.

SHORT: Denmark Groover.

THURMOND: Knew Denmark. We were on the judiciary committee together and he of course was a consummate lawyer and lawyer/legislator and we served together on the judiciary committee.

SHORT: Bill Lee.

THURMOND: Great Bill Lee, Chairman of the Rules Committee. And one day that same tax bill, when I finally got it out of committee, they finally let it go, I remember what I did to get it

out of committee. I went out and bought me – cause you know Bill Lee was a king, so what I did was I bought a crown. And I took it up to him and you know how you get in and say "my liege", and I handed him the crown that day and he moved my bill out of committee.

SHORT: You mentioned Tyrone Brooks. Tyrone's been a leader in the legislature for a number of years.

THURMOND: A great man. He came to Athens. I was with him last Thursday. All three of my elections he came over and campaigned for me. And he just worked and worked and worked and I don't think I would have been elected that third time if it had not been for Tyrone's involvement in that race.

SHORT: You mentioned Senator Paul Brown.

THURMOND: Yes.

SHORT: Served with him. Obviously in the Athens delegation. We used to go with my dad – I told you we farmed but we also had a vegetable and fruit crop and we would always take vegetables and fruits over to the old Firestone dealership that he had that's still there in Athens. And I used to love to go in there at Christmas time because he would have the toys all out. That was before the big shopping malls and all this stuff. We'd go into Firestone and I remember him

as a little boy when my daddy talking to him and me watching him, and then obviously serving with him was an honor.

SHORT: And the members who are now Congressman, Sanford Bishop is one.

THURMOND: Yes, sir. Sanford is my fraternity brother. He and I talk on the phone quite often. He helped me with my first bill and you know we obviously discuss political issues and maintain a friendship for years. Calvin Smirey also over there in Columbus. People I work with and serve with.

SHORT: Good. Anybody else?

THURMOND: I could name so many others. Culver Kidd. I remember the personalities that were bigger than life. Even in 1986 most of them were all still there. Yeah, Tom Murphy, Zell Miller, Culver Kidd, Billy McKinney, they were around. But you know, they were just bigger than life. Denmark Groover. They were all walking around and the legislature, you know, they've taken all the fun out of it. But back then it was the place to be.

SHORT: Yeah. Well you served also with two governors. Joe Frank Harris and Zell Miller. Tell us what you think about their administrations.

THURMOND: Well, Governor Harris first, he was governor when I was first elected and one day I went to see him as a freshman and the one thing he told me that I still remember, he said, "Michael, follow the money." He said, "Don't listen to what they saying. Look at how they appropriating the money and that's where all the truth lies." You know, him being a former Chairman of Appropriations.

SHORT: Yeah.

THURMOND: Because he was my first governor and then of course Governor Miller. I had worked for him and served with him so, you know, I always got along with Zell Miller. He was a consummate politician. He was the most political man I've ever met. And I don't say that in a pejorative way, but for him it was all politics. And if you can understand that you can understand him. And then after Zell Miller, Roy Barnes, too. You know, I served and was here when Governor Barnes was governor and now Sonny Perdue, who was a state senator. So, actually, all of them. I've know them all in one capacity or another.

SHORT: What was your reaction when Senator Miller spoke to the Republican Convention?

THURMOND: I wasn't overly surprised because it is who he is. You know, and you have to understand him for what he is. I'm not saying, you know, well you love or hate him, but he is a consummate, complete 100% politician. And I still talk to him. And we did welfare reform

together. If he hadn't given me the job my career was over. And so, you know, when I look back on it, he rescued me from political oblivion and really got me back into state politics. And if he had not done that, because welfare reform was the platform that I used to get to be elected Labor Commissioner, so I owe him that and will always be appreciative of it.

SHORT: Well, in addition to serving as Commissioner of Labor, you're also Vice-Chair of the Georgia Democratic Party. Now, if you will, I'd like to talk to you for a minute about party politics. First of all, as we all know, the Republican party has taken over General Assembly and the Governor's Office.

THURMOND: Yes.

SHORT: What happened?

THURMOND: We got beat. Well, you know, I look back on it like this. I'm a historian and if I had a baseball team that had won the World Series for 129 straight years and then lost a few World Series would that be a bad run? The Democrats had a good run and it was time – it's like pruning your favorite bush. You prune it, you know, maybe in the fall, whenever you prune and it looks all scrubby but then in the spring it blossoms with greener, more vibrant leaves and more beautiful blossoms. That's what's going on to the Democratic Party. We're being pruned. But as I speak, clearly, the National Democratic Party and I think the state Democratic Party is on its

way back. There's always a flux and a flow, a thickening and a thinning, a yin and a yang in politics. You stay in it long enough you're going to get beat or you're going to win. Can't but one or two things happen. And so, it's just part of the evolution. And at the end of the day we will be a better party for what has occurred over the last ten years.

SHORT: Well the Republicans tell us that they think the reason for their success has been the fact that they have built up a bench of candidates and that they train them, they bring them along slowly and then they put them in these races. Do you think that the failure of the Democratic Party to do that has had an effect?

THURMOND: I just think we need new ideas and new blood. You know, I think all of that. I think the national move plays into it as well. Clearly, the Republican Party struck a cord with some of their issues, whether it's fiscal conservatism and values and family and religion, you know, all of those things begin to play a very critical point beginning, you know really with Goldwater but it was Reagan who really brought in the Republican revolution and it has existed and expanded now for what, almost, 16 years. But all things come to an end and movements come. I was just reading in the New York Times this weekend how the Republicans are now gashing, pulling their hair and gashing their teeth because now they're at a deficit of ideas that they feel like the brand is tarnished, that they are struggling now to find new ideas and they're in disarray. It was just comical because that's exactly what was being said about the Democratic Party no less than five years ago. And if you study history, this is how history unfolds. This is

what it's about.

SHORT: So what do you see for the Democratic Party in Georgia down the road?

THURMOND: Well I think our key to really returning to power and influence is that we got to rebuild the coalitions that made us unique. You know we have to reclaim white working class voters and you know we got to build that coalition. It was urban blacks and rural, basically working class whites. And if we can rebuild that coalition we can actually reassume positions of power and influence. And I think we're on our way to doing it. I think when tough economic times present themselves, issues that transcend race and that deals more with the economy have a greater opportunity for success. And you know, they'll be Democratic governors again and lieutenant governors; it just a matter of time.

SHORT: Looking back over your career, what has been your proudest moment?

THURMOND: Probably that third election in Clarke County. Number one, I was scared to death. People saying don't do it because if you lose three times it's over. And so I just kind of put, not just my career, but everything I spent my life working towards and kind of just put it on the line and being in a majority white district people saying you'll never get elected. And it appeared as if that might true.

But we were able to build a coalition, you know, that provided the votes that made it happen and

just believing that I could, believing beyond, you know, the conventional wisdom. And back then we had white blacks represented, it was a big deal. And looking back at it, you know, today it's like okay. But back then, even in Athens-Clarke County for a majority district made up of white people to elect a black person to represent them in the legislature was a big deal. Now we're on the verge maybe of this majority white district that's called the United States of America electing a black man possibly to be the president. So that's how far we've come in a relatively short period of time.

SHORT: What's been your biggest disappointment?

THURMOND: Well, probably getting beat, not going to Congress. I always hoped I would get to Washington in a political sense. But even that opened doors. I wouldn't have been involved in what I did. So I don't know about politics. You know I don't think you ever run a losing election that it'd always do ten – I have ten objectives whenever I run for office. Number one is to get the most votes. But then there are nine other objectives. So if I can get eight out of ten and miss two even if one of the two is the most votes, that's still not a bad day.

SHORT: Well, what can we expect from Michael Thurmond down the road? Another office?

THURMOND: Well, I may have one more rodeo. You know I may go one more round. I want to be – I set out wanting to be the best Labor Commissioner Georgia's ever had and one of the

best of most respected in the country. That's my goal. If I can achieve that then whether anything else happens in my career I'll be satisfied. But if the people will give me a chance I'd like to hold higher office, but we'll have to see how that plays out.

SHORT: No definite plans?

THURMOND: Not yet. You know, right now I got to be focused – and by the way, the 2010 governor's race has already started. But I have to be focused on these 285,000 Georgians who are unemployed. I can't leave them right now. They are my responsibility, they're counting on me. People are losing their houses, their cars, their insurance, losing their families, losing everything, and the only thing standing between destitution and being able to support themselves and their families is the Labor Department. So this is a high responsibility and a great challenge and I'm going to till my last breath as the Labor Commissioner I'm going to do that job.

SHORT: Well you've done a wonderful job for the state.

THURMOND: Thank you.

SHORT: Thank you, Michael Thurmond, for being our guest. Anything else you want to say?

THURMOND: No, I just thank you all for believing, you know, and recognizing and giving me

an opportunity to be a part of this great political history that is Georgia. And I love Georgia, I love Georgia history, Georgia political history, and it's just an honor to be a part of it.

SHORT: Good. Well thanks.

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Page PAGE 31

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