

Dawson Mathis interviewed by Bob Short
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Dawson Mathis

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short, and this is Reflection on Georgia Politics. Another in a series of oral histories sponsored by the Richard B. Russell Library at the University of Georgia.

We're in Nashville, Georgia today in the home of Dawson Mathis, former Congressman from Georgia's second district, who served five terms in Washington. Welcome Congressman Mathis. Thank you for sharing some of your memories of your political career with us on our series.

You were born here in Nashville. Tell us a little bit about your early life, your family, and growing up here in Nashville.

MATHIS: Well, I don't know that there's very much that would be of interest, Bob, but I did grow up in Nashville, in Berrien County. I was born here in November of 1940. My family – both – both my mother and father's side were natives of Berrien County and had been in this county for generations, so it was kind of a small town growing up experience, but one that – that I treasure. My father, when I was like six years old, managed to borrow enough money to open a little grocery store, and he and my mother ran that store from 1947, I guess, until 1964, when the Internal Revenue Service came in and put a padlock on his door. But most of my afternoons were, and a lot of times early in the mornings were spent in that – in that grocery store. So I knew something about hard work and discipline, and back in those days on Saturdays in particular, we wouldn't get out of that grocery store until 11:00 or sometimes 12:00 at night. And particularly during the tobacco season, as we call it, when they were selling tobacco, it would be particularly chaotic, and as long as there was a potential for a customer to come in, my father wanted to keep those doors open. Because, even the 1940s and 50s, things were still pretty tough down here.

But, I guess, looking back on it, I had a fairly typical, small-town kid's life. I enjoyed school. I enjoyed sports. I enjoyed my friends. I made a lot of life-long friends that we still have contact with, and it was a wonderful experience. I wouldn't have traded it for growing up anywhere else.

My high school classmates were foolish enough to elect me class president of the graduating class of 1958, and I did not know at the time that it was a life time job, but they still call on me today when we're getting ready to do a class reunion or something like that. I'm the first one to be in the – in the van.

SHORT: So then you went away to South Georgia College?

MATHIS: Yeah – another good experience. I did not complete my course of education at South Georgia. I was interrupted by a marriage and a child, foolishly, but happily. But I started there in the fall of 1958 and completed two quarters and then dropped out, got married. Went back in the fall of '59 and completed one more quarter, and then my wife became pregnant with our first child and I had to seek full-time employment rather than continuing to unload box cars for the Alfred Dorm and Grocery Company in Douglas.

I then left – when we left, I was able to secure a job with Flowers Banking Company running a bread route in Valdosta, which was a unique experience, but also a good one. I made a lot of friends in Lowndes County – Valdosta in Lowndes County, and learned a lot about real life.

When you get up at 3:30 – 4:00 in the morning to unload box cars and run bread routes, life is a

reality.

SHORT: Then you went into television.

MATHIS: Well, actually, I didn't go directly to – from the bread truck to television, Bob. It was a little more securative route than that. I was actually doing some – I started doing some part-time radio work for a fellow named Hanson Carter, who later served in the legislature here and headed the Farm Services Administration during the Clinton Administration, but Hanson had a radio station here in Nashville and – and I started doing some part-time work for him, which led me to accept a full time radio job at a station called WRPB in Warner Robins, Georgia, which is where my wife was from, so we went and moved to Warner Robins and I worked at that station, and then came back following a disagreement with the station's owner about the 1962 gubernatorial race where I wanted to support Marvin Griffin and he was supporting Carl Sanders. We decided that we would – it would be to our mutual interest to part company, so I came back to Nashville and worked for Hanson for a very short period of time, like six months or so, and then I moved to Hawkinsville and I went to work for WCEH radio, where – with a fellow named Jim Popwell, who was a great influence on my life. I met a lot of people in Hawkinsville and enjoyed my time there.

And then, from there, through a fellow I had worked with in Warner Robins, who had gone to WALB-TV in Albany. He called me and told me there was a job opening at WALB for the news director. Well, at that time, I was 24 years old and I didn't know that I was qualified to be the

news director for the television station, but I went down and interviewed and got the job.

Actually took a little pay cut. I was making \$100 a week in Hawkinsville, and they offered me \$85 a week to come to Albany to the television station, but I thought that, at that time, television had more of a potential than radio did, so I – I took the job and that led to a lot of other interesting things in my career when I went to Albany.

SHORT: Albany at one time was the focus of a lot of national attention in the Civil Rights Movement. Were you involved in any of that?

MATHIS: Well, not really. That – that occurred primarily, Bob, before I got to Albany. That was '62 and '63, and I didn't get to Albany until '64 – in August or September – I think it was August of '64 when I went to Albany. Um – but the – the – the King arrest, and the Albany – the Albany movement was still there. That was primarily led by an attorney named C.B. King, who was a lawyer there in Albany, and a very articulate man, and a very knowledgeable man, and a man I came to – to admire and like. I'm not sure he ever really liked me, but I liked C.B. He had a very dry sense of humor and – I'm getting off the subject, but that – the movement was still going on, but it was past its heyday.

King had been arrested and he had been – he was gone from there. And there were some, even in the black community in Albany, that felt like King came in and used them to raise money and focus attention on himself and then – then he'd gone on to other things when the Albany movement was met by – I guess they would – it was passive resistance. It wasn't water hoses –

it wasn't – you know, billy clubs in the streets, or whatever. It was just, Lloyd Pritchett, who was chief of police in Albany – this happened, remember, prior to the time I got that, but he and -Asa Kelly was the mayor of Albany at the time, who later served as the head of the Department of Corrections under a governor that you served, and then became a Superior Court judge in Albany. Asa Kelly and Lloyd Pritchett decided they were going to diffuse the situation as best they could. This knowledge comes to me after the fact. I wasn't there when it was going on, but obviously they were successful with what they did.

But during the period of time I was in Albany, there were continuing protests and demonstrations going on in some communities surrounding Albany: Americas, Cordele, Moultrie. Cordele is where I first saw an American flag burned in front of the courthouse in Cordele. I was there with a camera – excuse me – with a camera and we recorded that, or filmed it at that time. We were using 16 mm film at the television station, but – they – a group of protestors, black protestors, took down a flag and burned it, and that's the first time that I sold a piece of film to a national network. NBC wanted that film because there was nobody else there, and in those days, burning the American flag was just unheard of. But I was there for Cordele. I was there for Moultrie. There was – there were problems in Moultrie in the – in the late 60s, and those were interesting days to say the least.

SHORT: At what point did you decide to run for Congress?

MATHIS: Well, I don't know that I can actually say for certain that there was a particular day. I

guess it probably was when my predecessor announced that he was not going to run again.

Maston O'Neal was – I don't know if you ever saw a picture, or whether you ever knew Maston, but if you saw a picture of Maston O'Neal, you'd say that guy's a Congressman. He had a full head of silver hair. He always wore a dark suit and a beautiful white shirt and a polka-dotted tie. You never know saw him with anything other than that polka-dotted tie.

But Maston was the kind of guy that he took everything too seriously. He had three heart attacks in the six years he served in D.C. because he was so – my judgment is that he was so stressed out about making the right decision on every vote, or every action that he took and he didn't say up there. He was elected in '64 and served three terms and in in April of 1970, in his sixth year, he announced that he would not be running again. And after he left Congress, he lived probably for another 25 years. So the stress, relieving himself of that stress obviously prolonged his life.

But he was an interesting fellow, very conservative. Once told me that – that there were two O'Neals in Congress and – and if he needed to know how he was going to vote on any issue, he would just look and see how the other O'Neal voted and he would vote the opposite way. So I think it's safe to say that Maston was a pretty conservative fellow. Of course, at that time, and I'm wondering off the point, but at that time, most of the Democratic members of Congress from Georgia, and from the South, were pretty conservative in their politics.

I had kind of laid the ground work for – for a run from Congress over the three or four years prior to the time that Congressman O'Neil announced he wasn't running again. I began to speak around at some civic clubs and make appearances here, there and everywhere. And, of course, my – my greatest asset in that race was the – the name identification that I had from being on

television, because when I went there, it wasn't just that I was the news director, I was the news man. I was the anchor on – I did it at 7:25 in the morning, 8:25 in the morning, at 12:00 noon, and 6:00 at night and 11:00 at night. Not generally all in the same day, although that had happened on occasion, but over a period of those five and a half years that I was there, I was – I was in the living rooms of people of the district more than any other candidate possibly could have been. I mean my – my exposure from that television was worth millions of dollars. You couldn't have bought that kind of publicity.

When I would go into anywhere, almost anywhere in the district, walking down the street people knew who I was. I mean, that was a tremendous asset in that race, which, as it eventually turned out, Bob, it was not about a lot of issues. You couldn't have probably driven a wedge between us on very many issues with Harry Wingate, Jr. and Fred Hand, Jr. and myself. There was a black candidate in the race named Tom Chatman, and he might have differed with us on some issues, but by and large, we were pretty much the same on issues, so it turned out to be a beauty contest and I won the beauty contest is essentially what happened.

But I made the decision that I was going to run when Congressman O'Neal announced he wasn't – I knew it was my time. I was 29 years old, had four little children, and less than \$500 in the bank, but I just felt like it was – it was time for me to run, so I went down to the – to the office of the general manager of the television station who was a friend of mine until the day he died, a guy named Ray Carrow, and I told Ray what I wanted to do and asked for a leave of absence, and he said, "Yeah, that'll be fine."

Well Jimmy Gray, James Harrison Gray, publisher of the Albany Herald, also, at that time,

owned the television station, almost entirety – in it's entirety, I should say, so I felt like it – I owed Mr. Gray the courtesy of going to him and telling him what I intended to do, so I got in my car and drove down to the Albany Herald and asked to see Mr. Gray and was shown in and he and I were not very close. I mean, we knew each other very casually, but he didn't have anything to do with the day-to-day matters of the television station. But I told him I was going to – what I planned to do and he obviously made it known to me that he was committed to Harry Wingate, who had run against Maston and lost by 500 votes in a run off in '64, which was only six years before that. And I told him I understood that. I asked him to be fair to me and to Harold in his news coverage, and he assured me that he would, which didn't turn out to be quite the case. But, when I got back to the television station, I had a note on my typewriter at the news room that said Ray Carrow needs to see you, so I went down there to see Ray and he said, "Dawson, I got to tell you that I can't give you that leave of absence." So, I said, "well, let me go type you up a letter of resignation, Mr. Carrow, because I'm going to run."

SHORT: Mm-hmm.

MATHIS: And obviously Jim Gray had called him before I got back to the station and said you can't – I told Jim Gray that Ray had agreed to give me a leave of absence at the station, but later on, during the race, I had a couple of people come to me and said I could have my job back at the station if I would drop out of the – drop out of the race, but I think I made it pretty clear to them that if I ended up shining shoes, I was going to stay in that race. I thought it was very winnable.

And as it turned out, it – it was.

SHORT: In those days, and today, there's quite a black voter population in that district. How did you go about campaigning among...

MATHIS: Well I campaigned among them just like I did with – with everybody else. I mean it – I always had the philosophy that it doesn't make any difference who or why they put them in the box with your name on it. I just want them in the box. But, in 1970, it's kind of hard to believe as we look back from it from the perspective of where we are in 2008, but it – it was a different world out, particularly down here in south Georgia. There was one of the candidates in the race, which will remain nameless, who wouldn't shake hands with a black man. And that word got to me. I had a couple – a couple of guys tell me of having seen it where he refused to shake hands. In a white country store, he would go and speak to the white people, but he wouldn't – he wouldn't shake hands or ask the black people for their vote.

I had had some experience, obviously, through my years in television, I had made some in-roads in the black community in my coverage of the Civil Rights Movement and I think I had gained the trust of at least a part of the black population by the way that I reported on what was – what was happening in their community, and I – I know that that was beneficial to me during that – during that race. I might also have said that – or say that it helped me that I had established relationships with a lot of law enforcement people and a lot of local officials, mayors, and county commissioners and whatever. A lot of these people felt that the national media: NBC, CBS,

ABC was less present in those days, I guess, but that they were not reporting what was going on accurately. Now whether or not that was true, I mean, I'll let others be the judge of that, but they felt like it wasn't and they felt like – that our coverage at Channel 10 was actually more accurate than what was being reported by the national media, and that gained me some confidence in the – in the – in the local community. I – I think I can safely say that, of the 23 counties in this district, when I ran in 1970, I had the support of most of the Sheriff's, and that was a big help.

SHORT: And you finished first in the primary, and then had a run-off, and then you had the great pleasure of facing a Republican in the general election.

MATHIS: Yeah, it was more of a pleasure in those days than it would be now, Bob, because in those days Republicans were not very numerous in south Georgia, but yeah, the people in this – in that district gave me like 40 – 48 and change percent of the vote in the first run-off, I mean in the first primaries, and we missed – and we narrowly missed winning it without a run-off. But then I was in a run-off with Harry Wingate, whose father had been the president of Georgia Farm Bureau Federation, and he had been on Senator Russell's staff in D.C. for several years, and had made – and had made a run for Congress in 1964 and came within 500 votes of – of beating Maston O'Neal for that open seat, so he was the prohibitive favorite, and I think most people thought he was – he was going to be the winner. And Harry – Harry was – he was an interesting fellow. After that race in '64, he came – he stayed in Albany. He'd gone back to

Washington. He ran for Congress actually the first time in 1954 when Gene Cox died. There was a special election and J. L. Pilcher won it and Harry rammed in and he was like – about the same age I was when I was elected. He was 28, 29 years old, but he had been in D.C. and came back down to Georgia, ran in that race, and then, when he wasn't successful, he went back to Washington and Senator Russell put him on the staff of the Appropriations Committee, if I'm not mistaken, and he served Senator Russell in that capacity until the '64 race, when Mr. Pilcher announced he wasn't going to run again. Then Eric came back to Albany and got in that race, and as I say lost by about 500 Votes to Mason O'Neal. Well, after that race, he stayed in Albany and began a practice of law over there and was into, you know, Rotary Club, and got active in civic affairs over there attempting to establish himself as somebody who was from the district, as opposed to being – coming down from D.C. to run. I, on the other hand, was a newcomer. I – Berrien County, my county, was not in that district at that – at that time, and so I was an outsider. I was the – the intruder, but that didn't, uh – that didn't – that didn't work.

Because the run-off turned out to be a pretty bitter affair on his part. He went after me tooth and nail, and I understand – I understood at the time. I understand it today, it was his only chance. This was his third run for Congress and if he was going to be elected, it had to be now, and – and we had televised debate on Channel 10, and they had a – they still have a noon time show over there called Town and Country, and they invited both of us to come and participate in a mini-debate, as it were, and, of course, we agreed, and Harry called me. He said, "You know, we almost elected a boy to send to – to Congress, and, you know, he's not a member of the church," which I was not at – at that time, even though my father was a Holiness Baptist preacher and –

and most people who knew me personally knew that fact, that I wasn't a member of any civic club, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, which wasn't quite accurate, but, nonetheless, he went after me tooth and nail on that program.

And when – when that program was over, the phone – every phone line at WALB was lit up. I sat at the front desk for about 30 minutes until they finally re – told me that the receptionist had to have her desk back. So they moved me to an open office, and I literally sat there from 1:00 until 5:00 taking call after call after call of people calling in to tell me how treacherous they thought Harry had been and how nasty he was, and I knew then that the election was over. But what – what I also knew, I had a call, and I don't feel like I'm betraying a trust, but there was a – the Ford dealer in Albany was a guy by the name of Bunny Pritchett, and Bunny was and is one of the finest people I've ever known. Very active in the community, very community spirited, and he did a lot for Albany, and everybody loved Bunny. He'd served as – on city council over there. Just a good guy, and he and Harry were close friends, and he was in Harry's brain trust. When Harry had run for Congress in '64 and when he was in this race against me. But I was in my headquarters that morning. I don't know why – just there doing something, and the phone rang and it was Bunny Pritchett, and Buddy said, "Dawson, I want to tell you something." He said, "I just can't be a part of what is about to happen. He's coming after you tooth and nail on issues that I don't agree ought to be brought up in this race, but I just want you to be aware that he's going to come after you."

My wife worked for a contractor over there named John Jay, who was a friend of mine, and John had actually loaned me a little money, and maybe a thousand dollars, and he said, then, but John

had a liquor store, so I became the candidate of the biggest liquor dealer in Albany on that program, and Bunny told me that he was coming after me for my wife's employer, who owned that liquor store, so it wasn't as if I weren't a little bit prepared for what he was coming with, thanks to Bunny Pritchett, but Harry destroyed himself that day on that debate. He – the race would have been a lot closer had he approached it in a different way. In my judgment. Harry's dead and gone and – and, uh – I sent flowers to his funeral, but I never heard anything back from his family. I guess they resented what I had done, even though I never attacked Harry, and I never attacked any opponent I ever had. I just couldn't run a race like that. Even when I ran against Senator Talmadge in 1980, I never attacked him. I attacked his record, but I didn't – I wouldn't attack him personally. And – and again, I'm digressing [Overlapping Conversations]

SHORT: No.

MATHIS: [Overlapping Conversations]

SHORT: No, that's wonderful. This is history, and we're interested in history, but we didn't mention your Republican opponent.

MATHIS: Well, he was a very nice young fertilizer salesman named Tom Ragsdale. A good looking guy. Dark head of hair and fairly articulate, but he was in the race, and then after I won the primary, he announced he was not – he was going to withdraw and then a couple of weeks

later, I don't know, somebody talked him into staying. Well he – his name was on the ballot, so that he was still going to be a candidate, so he got back in, but he didn't do much campaigning, and he didn't – he was probably about as underfinanced as I was. He didn't have any money, so we were fortunate enough in the general election to end up with 93% of the vote, and I guess that's probably pretty much unprecedented in Georgia history, and I don't think there'll be a congressional race in this state in the next 50 years where a Democrat will get 93% of the vote. It just ain't going to happen anymore.

But my – the biggest problem I had in that race, Bob, was money. As I say, I didn't have any money. My wife was working, I had four little boys, and I had no source of income. I mean I was – I was out of work and then – and I – when I was the – at the television station, when I left there, I was making \$1,000 a month -- \$12,000 a year, and raising the money was the problem. And I just – I had no source for it. It was \$25 here and \$50 there, and a fish fry here and a barbecue there and just catch as catch can. I remember one instance where I had a – I had bought a 30 minute television program, if you can believe it in this day and time, for – and we set the – the taping schedule for this certain night, and the cost of a 30-minute program was \$500. Well, I didn't have \$500, but I was campaigning in Early County that day in Blakely, Georgia, and I had made the acquaintance of a business man over there. He owned a large part of a bank, if not the whole bank. Had a peanut company and was a very prosperous and very respected pillar of his community. The man's name was Guy Maddox. And I had met Mr. Guy on previous occasions. I had spoken to the Rotary Club in Blakely, and he was a member. And all that particular day that I was due to schedule, I was scheduled to tape the program at 7:00, 8:00

that night, at WALB, I didn't have \$500 in the bank, so I went by to see Mr. Guy, since I was in Blakely, and asked him for his support, and he said, "Yeah, I'm going to – I'm going to vote for you, Dawson." And then he said, "Do you need any money?" Do I need any money? Does a farmer need rain? Uh, yeah, I need money Mr. Guy. I said, "Yes, sir, I would appreciate anything you could do for me." And I'll never forget, he pulled open his center desk drawer, and took out one of those big check books that, you know, have three checks in it, and he wrote me a check for \$500.

You never forget that. I came straight back to the TV station endorsed check, headed over to them, and we taped the program. Excuse me.

SHORT: So, then it's off to Washington.

MATHIS: Yes.

SHORT: Freshman Congressman, what 435 members. You must have felt like a needle in a haystack up there.

MATHIS: Well, I didn't feel out of place. I felt like that's where I was supposed to be. I had – I had never had any political experience, Bob, you'll have to excuse me. I get a little – I buried an uncle yesterday and I'm still a little emotional. I had, as you know, covered the legislature for the television station, so I knew a little bit about how the legislative process worked. And I

thought I was fairly astute politically, so, even though I was the youngest member of Congress, I felt like I kind of fit right in. I was 29 when I was elected. 30 when I – actually when I was sworn in, and I didn't keep that title very long. There was – um – one of the long serving, and most distinguished members of Congress was from South Carolina – a fellow by the name of Mendel Rivers, and Mendel Rivers died on Christmas day of 1970, and a special election was held in April, and his successor was a friend – a guy who became my closest friend in Congress, named Mendel Davis, and Mendel was the – he was 28 when he was elected, so he took that title away from me in April. I held it from January to April in a way, but no I didn't feel lost.

I felt like I was capable of doing the job, but I guess you – if you are going to be in politics, you've got to have a certain amount of confidence in yourself, or you wouldn't be there in the first place, but I never felt lost. I felt like I was where I was supposed to be.

We went up there. Again, I still hadn't had a paycheck since April, and my wife worked right on through November, I guess – maybe even December. John Gay may have paid her for December, but I now am faced with the task of getting my family to D.C. You've got to find a place to live – this, that, and the other. I made a couple trips up there. We did find a house. We were in a community where I thought that the kids could – out in Virginia where they had a good school system, and the kids would be comfortable.

So we moved in late December of 1970, and I had no other way to get up there so I rented a U-Haul truck and we loaded her up and – and headed out to D.C. That's the first time I made national news when they reported this young idiot from – who got elected to Congress from South Georgia, moves his family to D.C. in a U-Haul truck. Well, I'll tell you something else,

Bob. I stayed up there until 2005 for various reasons. Not all that time, not in Congress obviously, but when I came back to this cabin where you are sitting, I came back in a U-Haul truck. So we went up there and came back in a U-Haul truck. But, I digress, as usual.

But, no, I felt very comfortable being in Washington. Actually the term of office begins on January 3. The previous Congress, the Ninety-first, did not adjourn until literally New Year's Eve in 1970, so when they adjourned, they adjourned, they adjourned with a resolution to come back on the 21 of January of 1971. Even though I was – I assumed office on January 3, I wasn't sworn, didn't take the oath of office until the 21, which, as you know, was the day that Senator Russell died. And, I took the oath of office at noon, and he died sometime after 3:00 that afternoon—if I remember correctly. So, it's one of the great pleasures of my life in saying that I served with Dick Russell, and I met him, of course, on more than one occasion. I went to see him after my primary victory, I went to see him and called on him and Senator Talmadge when I had gone to Washington, but I – I never saw him after I was actually elected in November. I only saw him after I had won the primary.

But, so – yeah, we – we just jumped right into it and started getting, setting up the office up there. One of the best decisions I ever made was to keep the staff of – of – largely of my predecessor, Congressman O'Neal, since I had not challenged him, there was no animosity there. He was extremely helpful to me. He had a chief of staff, executive assistant, administrative assistant, whatever you want to call it, by the name of John Ellis. And John had been in D.C. for years and years, and years, and had worked for Congressman O'Neal for the whole time he was there, so I asked John to stay on, and to retain whatever staff he felt like would best serve the

needs of my district. And John said, “Congressman, you know, I’m eligible to retire.” And I said, “Yeah, I know that, John, but, you know, I need you, and I need help.” And he said, “Well, I’ll give you a year.” And he did. And that was the best – the best decision that I made as far as staffing my office was concerned was to keep John on. And we had some people had – I had a young man from Brinson, Georgia, who was working as press secretary for Congressman O’Neal, by the name of George Watts, and George agreed to stay on and – and we had – I guess there were three other secretarial types, administrative types that had worked for Congressman O’Neal that stayed on with me, which they were a tremendous help.

SHORT: How did you meld with the party leadership? You had an orientation session?

MATHIS: Yeah, we did, and it was – it was helpful. Actually it was a bipartisan – that – in those days the orientation session was more bipartisan than I think it is today. I haven't had any recent experience with it, but Mo Udall, who was the Congressman from Arizona, was one of the – one of the people that did the orientation, and I was very impress with Mo and – and with what he did, but as far as leadership is concerned, see it was – there was a majority leader’s race going on and Mo Udall was in that race. It was him and Hale Boggs and two or three others – I forget who all it was, but this was – John McCormick was leaving the speakership, and that had opened up, and it was clear that the then majority leader, Carl Albert, was going to become speaker, and he did. So the race was for majority leader, and it was a pretty hotly contested race. And I – my first exposure to leadership – well after – on election night, I got telegrams from all these people

congratulations, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah. But, my first experience with the leadership was when I was sitting in my office and one of the secretaries came in and said, "Hey Boggs, Congressman Boggs is on the phone," and this – so I, of course I answered the phone, and he said, "Dawson, this is Hale Boggs. I need to see you." And I said, "Yes, sir. I'll come right over." He said, "No, no, no, no. I'll come to you." And I said, "Mr. Boggs, that ain't the way I work." He said, "Sit tight. Can I come over?" And I said, "Yes." So he came over and asked for my support.

Well, I had already made up my mind that I was going to vote for Mo Udall on the first go around and Mo and his personal politics was a lot more, I guess the word would be liberal, progressive, whatever then – then I was and – but, I felt like that – that – that the institution in some ways needed to be shaken every once and a while, and Mo was shaking – he was shaking the tree, and, of course, it ended up in a run-off, but the final two candidates were Hale and – and Mo Udall, and Hale Boggs one. Of course, he later died in – in the plane crash in Alaska with my friend, Nick Begich. So, Mo Udall and his concession speech in the caucus made one of the most memorable statements I ever heard in all my time in politics when he – he – he knew – both of them had counted votes, and Mo knew he had enough votes to win. Of course he didn't, but he thought he did. And he said, "My friends, during this race, I have discovered the difference between a caucus and a cactus. On a cactus all the pricks are on the outside." And I have never forgotten Mo's concession speech.

SHORT: You know, they say that new Congressman tend to gravitate toward people of their

own professions, like lawyers to lawyers and businessmen to businessmen. I doubt that there were any television celebrities in Congress at that the time.

MATHIS: Yeah. Well actually, there was one. There was Lionel Van Deerlin from San Diego, California who had done commentary on television. He wasn't a real reporter, but he had done commentary on a TV program out there and had gained some exposure. It's interesting you asked that question, Bob. The Washington Post did a story following my election to track, I believe there were twelve races around the country either at a congressional level or a gubernatorial level where television so-called personalities were involved in these races. And of the twelve candidates, there was only one that won and I was happy that that one was me. But, that has changed. You know, Jesse Helms went to the Senate based on a television career in North Carolina, and there have been others since that time.

There also have been any number of professional athletes that have gotten elected: Jack Kemp, and, of course, when I went to Congress I served on the Ad Council committee with a fellow by the name of Vinegar Bend Mizell. Wilmer Mizell had been a baseball pitcher and gained a lot of notoriety. And I also served with Bob Mathias, who was an Olympic champion in the – in the '50s and '60s from California. So, a lot of those guys had gained notoriety by their athletic accomplishments. But there weren't a lot of people from my profession. But, you know, there've always been a lot of newspaper men involved in politics—not the least of which was Harding, who owned newspapers in Ohio before he became president. You know, it's not as if the presses or the media has never been involved in politics. It's just a new world.

And, one point – let me back up just a bit. You were talking about my race for Congress. You must remember that in 1970, we didn't have satellites, we didn't have cable, we didn't have all these – we didn't have computers, of course. You didn't have all these media outlets when people watched television in my Congressional district, there were two stations that they had an option for. For the largest part of the district, they either watched me or they watched Channel 6 out of Thomasville Tallahassee and we were the dominant station. So it wasn't like I was competing with CNN or ESPN or all these others, and that made a big difference in that race, too. They just – they were exposed to me whether they wanted to be or not.

SHORT: Mm-hmm. One of the first jobs you had was to talk about committees. How did you go about selecting committees, and which committees were you appointed to?

MATHIS: Well, my predecessor had served on the agriculture committee, and I had made a commitment that that's the committee I would try to get assigned to, and of course in those days the committee, the Democratic Committee on Committees was the Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee. And Phil Landrum was on the Ways and Means Committee and he was my advocate to get on the Agricultural Committee and he was successful in doing that. I think there were six or seven of us freshman who went on the committee that year and Phil got me on ahead of everybody else, which gave me --

SHORT: Seniority.

MATHIS: -- A leg up on seniority. Even though I was the youngest guy, I had the lead on seniority, which proved to be valuable in terms of sub-committee chairmanships opening up. I was next in line. Phil Landrum, by the way, he was wonderful to me. He took me under his wing and he -- he led me and he guided me and he kept me out of trouble on a lot of things. And he and I did an interesting deal in '70 -- I guess it must have been in '72, Nixon had a -- a proposal to reduce the tax on automobile -- new automobiles being sold. I forget what his package was, but he would take the -- the luxury tax off of automobiles and sent that proposal to the Ways and Means Committee. What I discovered that what he had done was pertaining only to automobiles. It didn't pertain to pick up trucks. Well, behold, I've got a few pick up trucks in my district, so I went to Mr. Landrum and his eyes lit up. He said, I think we've got us a good issue, so he -- we dropped the bill in together and eventually when the bill passed, it had exemption for pick up trucks, as well. Phil Landrum was a giant of a man.

SHORT: Were there other committees besides agricultural?

MATHIS: No, I didn't even try for another committee the first year. They came -- Phil came to me at the beginning of, I guess it would have been '73, the beginning of my second term, and said they -- they need -- we need you on the House Administration Committee and that's the committee that does housekeeping. It runs the restaurants. It's responsible for parking. It's responsible for office staff allowances. It's -- it's just -- it's a members committee more or less,

and no glamour, just a lot of work. But it also is good for – you can develop a little power base off of that committee by doing favors for other members. You know, I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine kind of thing. So, I said, "Well sure, I'll be glad to serve if – if leadership wants me to be there." And they also were looking for somebody that they thought had some staying power. You don't want to put somebody on that that's going to be up for re-election that might get beat because he voted to increase staff -- the money for hiring staff by two slots next year, so they thought I was pretty safe, and – and I guess I was, and so I went on the House Administration Committee at the beginning of my second term.

And he – it was chaired by a crusty old fellow from Ohio by the name of Wayne Hayes, who later found himself in some hot water about a young lady by the name of Elizabeth Ray, and Wayne ended up resigning from Congress as a result of that scandal. But I enjoyed that service on the – on the House Administration Committee.

One of the subcommittees I served on there was the Elections Subcommittee and following the Watergate situation with Nixon, we passed some new election laws, including the public funding for presidential elections, and some other election reforms, which we placed – tried to place some limitations on contributions, limitations on spending, and the Supreme Court knocked down several of those. We had to go back and redo it in '76, but that was interesting work.

When they started talking about the funding – public funding for presidential elections, I offered an amendment in committee that said prior to the time that any candidate could receive federal funds for – to spend on his election, he'd have to take an IQ test, and they didn't have to pass it, but the results had to be made public. And I've often thought in recent days with George W.

Bush in the White House how the future of this country might have been changed if my amendment had passed.

SHORT: You later served on the Steering and Policy Committee.

MATHIS: Yeah, as a result of – as a result of Watergate, we elected a huge class of Democrats in 1974, that came in in 1975, and they were reform minded to – to – to say the least. They knocked off three committee chairmen – long-term committee chairmen – Democratic committee chairman, because until that time it had been just the seniority system that dictated who was going to be the chairman of the committee. Nothing but seniority. And this new class decided, well – along with some reform-minded Democrats who had already been there and decided they wanted to change that, so they took away the ability of the Ways and Means Committee Democrats to be the Steering and Policy committee and they established a new form of selection and basically it was that there would be 13 zones around the country that would have one member elected by the Democratic members within that zone, and then the speaker and the leadership would have the other 13 – the speaker having the seat, the majority leader having a seat, the whip having a seat – chief deputy whip – caucus chair, blah, blah, blah. So, I got myself elected from the zone that represented Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee, so I had the pleasure of serving on the Steering and Policy committee for four years, which at that time was well out of my – my term had expired, but you could only be there for four years anyway. The Steering and Policy committee was a very interesting committee because

it – it makes committee assignments for incoming members or members that want to move from one committee to the other, so that also gives you a little...

SHORT: Clout – a little clout

MATHIS: I wouldn't have used that word, Bob, but I wouldn't disagree.

SHORT: Ed Jenkins told me that you are responsible for him getting on the Ways and Means Committee as a freshman.

MATHIS: Well, Ed probably gives me a little too much credit, but I think I might have had something to do with it. That little knocker would not give me any alternative. I had a handful of freshman coming in that year, including three from Georgia – not only Ed, but Billy Lee Evans from Macon, and Doug Bernard from Augusta. And Evans wanted Public Works—I can do that. Bernard wanted Banking—I can do that. Jenkins wants Ways and Means. Well there hasn't been a freshman on the Ways and Means Committee in 50 years. A freshman Democrat. There may have been a Republican or two. I don't know. But I kept telling Jenkins, I said, "Jenkins, you know, I've got to have some back up. Give me some way out." He said, "I can't. I don't want anything else." I said, "Well, Jenkins, you – if we don't get Ways and Means, which is one of the last committees that's assigned, you may end up on the D.C. Committee." Jenkins said, "Well, I'll be the best member the D.C. Committee ever had." So, he held out, and

we were able to – we were able to prevail, but I got to tell you Bob, in all seriousness, and Jenkins knows this—he’s never admitted it to me, but his predecessor Phil Landrum had something to do with that too, because he had a lot of friends that he left in congress, and he – Ed had – had worked for Phil – had served Phil for a number of years, and I know Phil called on his friends to help Ed. But we also have had another Georgia – we put Wyche Fowler on the Ways and Means Committee and, actually, I had four – I put four – well, I nominated and was able to help get four members from my zone on that committee in one year, and I must say that’s – it’s a little unusual to be able to do that. I had Harold Ford from Tennessee, and Kenny Holland from South Carolina, Ed Jenkins from Georgia, and Wyche Fowler later in the year, from Georgia.

SHORT: Isn’t it unusual to have two members from one state?

MATHIS: Depends on the size of the state, but yes, it is, but particularly a state the size of Georgia. I mean, at that time, I think we had 8 Democratic members, but it’s a – a little unusual.

SHORT: Let’s get back to you. There is an expression around Washington, which I’ve heard many times is that freshman should be seen and not heard. Do you remember your first floor speech?

MATHIS: I don’t. Do you?

SHORT: Do you remember your first vote?

MATHIS: No, I couldn't tell you that. No I couldn't. I just know that whatever – whatever I was talking about, I must have been as nervous as a cat, but I don't remember today. I couldn't tell you that.

SHORT: Could it be for Speaker, in the caucus?

MATHIS: Well that would have been in the – well, yeah, it would have been even in – in – in the uh – yeah that would have probably been the first vote. It would have been the first vote for the Speaker.

SHORT: Yeah.

MATHIS: And that would have been for Carl Albert.

SHORT: Carl Albert, yeah.

MATHIS: Yeah.

SHORT: Okay. Uh – Jenkins also told me that he had a mentor, who was Phil Landrum. Did you have one?

MATHIS: Phil Landrum.

SHORT: Phil Landrum.

MATHIS: Yeah, Phil Landrum was extremely kind and generous to me. He kind of took me under his wing as they say and he introduced me to a lot of people, and he helped me a lot. He – the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee at that time was Wilbur Mills from Arkansas, and Phil and Wilbur Mills were very close and this is prior to the time that it was known that Wilbur had an alcohol problem. You know, he ended up in –with a young woman who was somewhat notorious as a dancer called Fanny Fox and jumped in the tidal basin one night after she got out of Mr. Mill's car, but – Wilbur had a little hideaway right off the floor of the house at 208 – H 208 and about bull bat time every day, a lot of the older members, including Phil, would go have a pop with Mr. Mills in that little hideaway there, and they started inviting me to come by there and socialize with them, and then I was – you know, I was taken aback at first, but then it was a – I realized what a high honor it was to be accepted by the Old Bulls, and, parenthetically, I never saw Wilbur Mills take a drink. I had – I was – I couldn't have been more shocked when all this came out about him, but he certainly, Wilbur Mills was certainly one of the most knowledgeable and intelligent men I've ever – ever known in my life. He was the tax

code and he ran that committee with an iron hand, but Phil Landrum had a great deal of sway with Wilbur and they were very, very close friends and when they invited me into that inner circle, I felt like I had – I had arrived, as it were. But they were very good to me. Particularly Phil Landrum.

SHORT: What was the interrelationship between the Georgia delegation.

MATHIS: Well, by and large, it was good, particularly among Democrats. But I – I guess Stuckey was the newest member of the delegation until I got there. He went there in '66, or was elected in '66, sworn in in '67. But I came in '70, but other than that, they – some of those guys have been around for a while. Phil – I think Phil Landrum went up there in '54, and Jack Flint went up there very shortly after that. And, you know, John Davis and Bob Stevens, and some of those guys have been around for a long time, so I was kind of a new kid on the block, but they – we had a good working relationship within that delegation. Brinkley was – Jack Brinkley was there. I would say it was extremely – we tried to help each other and we kind of, you know, spread out over the various committees. I had Agriculture, Phil had Ways and Means, Jack Flint had Appropriations, Bob Stevens had Banking, and if we needed something from those, one of us needed something from one of those areas, everybody worked well --- very well together, I would say.

SHORT: Okay. During your time in Congress there were several issues that actually divided the

American people. Let's talk about some of them, like the Vietnam War.

MATHIS: Well you are right. It was very divisive and – and, um, even more so – far more so than the situation in Iraq is today, but it was – it was a very trying time. Of course it was – every – every night, even when I was at the television station it was so many casualties in Vietnam today, but they also did the body counts of the other side. You know, we lost 24 soldiers today, but we killed 216 Vietcong, North Vietnamese, and you never knew how accurate any of that was. But it was – it was bloody. People were very divided over it, but the attitude of most people in my congressional district was if you are not going to win it, get out. And, of course, there was no winning it. In my judgment, even looking back at it now from the perspective of 35 years having gone by, there was no way to win it. There's no win. You – you're fighting, you don't know who you are fighting. You – you see them in the street right today, and tonight they are shooting at you. I mean how do you know who they are? And I'm afraid we got ourselves bogged down in that kind of situation in Iraq. I hope I'm wrong, and, of course, the casualties – the number of fatalities in Iraq is not nearly approximated that of what we had in Vietnam, but I think the total – the dollar cost and the cost – and the prestige and the damage that has been done to the reputation of our country, will exceed what happened in Vietnam over a long of period of time, but that's not what you asked me about.

People were divided and my stance was not any different than that, of the majority of the people in my district and that is let's win it or get out. But I continued to vote to support the appropriations for that war. I didn't feel like we could abandon the troops, and I voted right up

to the last to fund it. But the big push was to cut off funding for the war and the theory being that if you didn't have the money, then obviously you have to bring the troops out. But I'm convinced that we could have gotten out of Vietnam a lot earlier than – than we did. I think that it was prolonged unnecessarily by the actions of the Nixon administration. And that's, to me, regrettable. One of the great failures of the Nixon administration to not have ended that war earlier. He knew that there was no way that we were going to win it. I mean we – it couldn't be done.

SHORT: Dawson, President Nixon resigned on August the 9th 1770[sic], 1794[sic].

MATHIS: 1794?

SHORT: Yeah, under the --

MATHIS: Bob, I was not there in 1794.

SHORT: Under the threat of impeachment.

MATHIS: I may have been there in 1974.

SHORT: Do you think the House of Representatives would have voted impeachment?

MATHIS: I don't think there's any doubt about it. Yeah, they would have. Uh – for a number of reasons. I'll tell you a little story, and you probably want to edit out when you make the cut on this, but, when they had the famous 18-minute gap on the tapes came out. They had – up until that time, the Nixon administration had made the conscious decision politically that they were going to stonewall it. But after that disclosure, they decided they were going to let it all hang out – they were going to tell it all. So he invited a group of mainly southern Democrats who had been largely supportive of him on Vietnam and a lot of other domestic issues to come down to the White House and have dinner and he was going to have a – a tell it all, answer any questions you've got kind of session with us that had generally been supportive of him.

So the, after dinner the question and answer session began and the first question that was asked was by a crusty old Floridian by the name of Bob Sikes, who happened to be a native of Worth County, Georgia, but Bob lived in Crestview, Florida, and represented the panhandle there for many years, and he was a senior member of the Appropriations Committee. And it just happened over that previous weekend, there had been some threats by Russia to go in to Israel because Israel and Egypt were in a little tiff. Well Nixon had put our armed forces on alert to be prepared to go in in case Russia went after Israel, and I – you probably would remember that.

Not many people that'll be watching this would remember that, but it happened and Siches asked a question, “Well, do you think that you putting the troops on alert caused the Russians to back away from their threat?” Well Nixon went into a 15 minute dialogue on the history of the Middle East, and it was obvious that he was very well informed. He knew the issues. And then

at the end of that time, he said, “But let me tell you one thing.” He said, “Mr. Khrushchev has his finger on a button that can kill 50 million Americans, and I know it. And I have my finger on a button to kill 150 million Russians, and he knows that.” And in his exact words, “He Goddamn well don’t want to F with me.”

I walked out of the White House that night, Stuckey was with me. I think we had ridden down there together. We were still on speaking terms in those days. But, we walked out of the White House that night. We both were shaking. I mean, this – this man had just lost it, and I would have voted to impeach him if for no other reason than I thought he was insane. And I think that – in many ways he had a good presidency, and he did many things I agree with, but at the end, and understandably, the pressure he was under had to drive anybody nuts, but – but I think he was just over the – over the edge. I never saw him, Bob, and I don’t want to sound like I’m dumping on him because I say I agree with a lot of what he did, but I never saw him when he didn’t have make-up on. We’d go down to the – to the White House for any function and he had this pancake – you know, he had that dark beard.

SHORT: Uh-huh

MATHIS: It probably cost him the election against Kennedy and -- and, uh, he was very conscious of it, but by the time you’d get to the White House at 7:00 at night or so for a reception or dinner, it would be down on his collar. The only man I ever saw that wore make-up consistently.

SHORT: The question at the time was, what did he know and when did he know about Watergate? Do you have any theory on that?

MATHIS: No, I – I think that's pretty – been pretty well documented that he – he knew it. I don't think he knew it beforehand, but I think he knew it pretty shortly after it – it happened, and – and – and did do his best to – to cover it up. If he had come clean, or if he had taken those tapes out on the side lawn of the White House and called the press, and said watch me pour gasoline on these and burn them, it would have never happened. But it – but he was concerned, as every president must be, about his place in history, and how he'll be judged, and I think he – I think he thought he could stonewall it, which is a mistake most politicians who find themselves in trouble make.

They try to cover it, they try to deny it, and by and large the American people are pretty forgiving, and if you come out and say I made a mistake, you know, we believe in redemption. And if you say I made a mistake, and I'm going to do better, they might let you get away with it, but if they catch you lying, in a bold face lie, they don't respond to that very well. But the remarkable thing about the Nixon situation was the night that he left, or the day left – that Jerry Ford took over, uh, there were no tanks in the streets. You know, there was no armed rebellion. It was – it was very peaceful and very tranquil and it worked. Our system worked. But that was one of the toughest times in the history of this country, and I will always treasure the fact that I was there while – while that was going on. I had several friends – good friends who served on

the – on the Judiciary Committee with Chairman Peter Rodino, and Rodino was a dear, dear, dear friend of mine. Walter Flowers from Alabama and Larry Hogan from – Republican from Maryland, and these guys were close to me, and I know what they were going through. Walter Flowers from Alabama had – had the Nixon folks. I don't know whether Nixon did or not, but the Nixon Folks called George Wallace and – and got George Wallace to try to put pressure on Walter, and Walter told me that he'd gotten a call from Governor Wallace about – about his vote. But, Walter was in the White House that night Nixon made the Khrushchev comment, too, and I think that rattled him as much as all the things that he had done to try to cover up the Watergate. But the most remarkable thing, as I say, was that it was so peaceful. A very traumatic time, but the country survived.

SHORT: Gerald Ford. He became president. What was the mood of Congress at that time?

MATHIS: I would say that most members of Congress wanted to see Jerry Ford succeed. Jerry Ford was a decent, good man. We might have disagreed on some issues, but I can tell you I voted with Ford probably more often than I did with – with my leadership on a lot of issues of – fiscal issues and those kind of things. I had a good relationship with Ford. In those days, unlike today, in the post Gingrich area – era, you can get along cross-eyed. You can – you could work with each other. You – and – and we got things done for the country, and Jerry Ford was a large part of that. He – even though he was highly partisan on some issues, he also put the country ahead of his party. And Jerry – Jerry Ford was a decent guy, and I think most members,

Democratic and Republican wanted to see him be successful. Of course when – when Jimmy Carter became a candidate on the Democratic side and I, obviously, my support went to Carter. I didn't support Ford for president, but I wanted him to be successful. I want every American President to be successful. But – but Jerry deserved better than he got in retrospect, and as far as the reputation he had for – for clumsiness and, you know, the Chevy Chase character off of Saturday Night Live. That wasn't Jerry Ford. Jerry Ford was a good athlete. He wasn't a brilliant man – I certainly wouldn't say that he had the – the IQ of an Ed Jenkins or Elliot Levitas, but Jerry was nobody's dummy, either. A good – good man, good guy.

SHORT: Do you think that Watergate was the reason for his defeat?

MATHIS: Well, I'm not sure if Watergate, per se. Watergate had a lot to do with it. There's no doubt about that. But I think the fact that – that he pardoned Nixon probably as a result of Watergate, probably had more to do with his defeat than anything else. Plus, Carter was a charming candidate. He was very attractive candidate. A fresh face. An alternative to business as usual in Washington, and – and, you know, that million dollar smile and I will never lie to you. All those things contributed, but I think probably pardoning Nixon probably cost Ford more than anything else.

SHORT: Do you recall the Abscam scandal.

MATHIS: Shoot, I reckon.

SHORT: What are your memories of that?

MATHIS: Bob, I – my belief always has been that it was pure and simple entrapment. Um – now you can argue that that didn't justify what happened with these members of Congress, but, you know, Eve couldn't resist the fruit and they – they went after these guys big time. And it's – and there's no doubt in my mind either that they went after the Democrats because--

SHORT: You're speaking now of the FBI.

MATHIS: Even the FBI. You see, they – they got six Democrats and I think one day somebody down there in the FBI woke up and said, whoa, wait a minute. We got to go get us a Republican, and that's when they went after Dick Kelly from Florida, and he was the 7th Abscam victim, and when they got him, they shut the operation down. Now what does that tell you? Um – I regret it. There's no justification for it. Um – I, at that time, the time that Abscam was going on, had been through a divorce. Financially, I was strapped. I got four kids, two of whom are approaching college age, and despite the fact that you're making forward of \$250,000, which was a raise from the \$1,000 a month I was making at the television station, when you have a house in D.C. and a house in Georgia, and you are back and forth, the money doesn't go very far, but, long story short, I was strapped. And I don't know what I would have done if they had walked in there and

offered me \$50,000 to do what I had already done for nothing for people. I think I know what I would have done, but I don't want to face that temptation.

And what – what these guys were asked to do was to introduce a bill to prohibit Bob Short from being expelled from the country. He had been here on a visa and he wanted to stay, and if you introduced a bill to say you can't expel him, that bill would be referred to the judiciary committee. And until the judiciary committee acted on that bill, Bob Short couldn't be expelled. So, I mean that – it's a – I had nurses who were here from the Philippines who had over-stayed their visa, but they needed the hospital where they were working needed them. So the way you keep them here is to introduce a bill. And – and it – it, you know, you do it for nothing. If somebody comes in and says, you know, something you do for nothing, I'll give you \$50,000 to do, so, it – it – it could be a – it could be a pretty big temptation. I'm glad I wasn't exposed to it.

SHORT: You mentioned having a home in Georgia and having a home in Washington. How did you balance your duties as a Congressman and your need to campaign in the district.

MATHIS: Well, I guess that came pretty easily to me. I told you I moved my family up there in December of 1970, but they didn't like it. My wife didn't like it, my children weren't happy, so we decided to – we'd move back to the district. I – when I was there, it was like I was coming home almost every weekend to campaign, or to – to – to do events or whatever the reason might be. And so, we moved back to Albany in '72. And that way I did see more of them actually than I did while I was in D.C., but still I didn't see nearly enough of them. That's what politics does

to you, particularly when you have a young – a young family as I did. In retrospect, I didn't – you can't change anything, and there's not a lot I would change, but I probably – I probably got into it too early. My kids should have been older, because I – I missed a lot of things with them that I regret. I just guess I wasn't the kind of father I needed to be. I've tried to make it up to them since. I don't think you every really can, but I'm closer to all my children than I ever was when they were small, and I feel like that I missed a great part of their lives. But when you're – when you are – when you're in politics, that happens.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

MATHIS: Unfortunately. It takes a toll on the family.

SHORT: Mm-hmm. Just before you left office in '80, Carter was president and we had the Iranian hostage problem. Do you think that this country could have done more to have them freed while Carter was president?

MATHIS: I don't know what it could have possibly been, Bob. I mean, I really don't. The only way I guess you have a chance of getting them out of there outside of diplomatic channels is to do what they tried to do, and Carter didn't screw that up. He took the blame for it as he should. He was the chief – he was the Commander in Chief. He was President, but that was a military snafu, when they had the – the – the disaster out there in the desert. But I don't know what

possibly could have been done more to – to get them out of there than what was. And there is no doubt in my mind that the – the Reagan people cut a deal with the Iranians to – to have them released, if he were elected. I mean it has got to be more than coincidence that they were released the day he was sworn into office. And, of course, we know later on what happened with his arms for hostages deal, which is just, to me, one of the darkest episodes in American history, but most of the people down in our part of the country think that Regan was probably one of the finest presidents we've ever had. I have a little differing opinion on that.

SHORT: Mm-hmm.

MATHIS: I think some ways he did do a good job, and in other ways he nearly bankrupted the country.

SHORT: Carter became president and he was accused of not having good relations with Congress and not having good effort to get along with Congress. Is that true?

MATHIS: Well, I don't think he did all he could to get along with Congress. It was kind of like when he was Governor of Georgia. I think that when the legislature didn't do what he wanted to, he kind of went directly to the people and that's just not going to work in a Congressional setting and he also was a – a little – maybe not him personally, but his staff was a little reluctant to let his friends help him in Congress. And there's no – there's no doubt that there was some

antagonism between him and the Congress. He and – he and Tip O’Neill – speaker O’Neill, never had the kind of relationship that O’Neill later developed with Regan. I think that Tip and Ronald Regan got along a lot better than Tip and Jimmy Carter did. Tip had a particular dislike for Hamilton Jordan. He called him Hannibal Jerken. And he – Hamilton kind of--they had the attitude, well we want it and it’s ours, and we’re going to run this thing and you – you know, you’ve just got to have some help. You’ve got to – you can’t dictate to the Congress what they are going to do because, particularly on the house side – they – you know – the only way you get to become a member of the House of Representatives is to be elected by the people. You can be appointed to the Senate. You can be appointed Vice President and become the President, as Jerry Ford did, but if you’re a member of the House, you’ve been elected by the people. And, I love the institution. I always will, and I’ve got a great deal of respect for it, but we can be pretty independent cusses because we ain’t got to answer to Jimmy Carter. We answer to the people in our district, and I think the President has got to realize that if he’s going to be successful. He’s got to learn to deal with – with the – with the – particularly members of the House. I think sometimes the Senate is easier to deal with for a President than the – than the House is.

SHORT: Another rap on Carter was that his staff was too inexperienced and too Georgian.

MATHIS: I won’t deny it. I think there’s a great deal of truth to that. Billy Evens told me one time when Billy was a member of Congress from Central Georgia – Macon – he said, “Mathis, do you ever have trouble getting to the President?” I said, “Yeah, I do.” He said, “Well, I – I’ve

figured out..." No, "Do you ever trouble getting to Hamilton Jordan?" And I said, "Yeah, I do." And he said, "Well, I figured out how to get to Hamilton Jordan." And I said, "Well how's that Billy?" He said, "Well, I call the White House and say I need to speak to the President." And he said, "Hamilton's going to call me back. If I call Hamilton, he'll never call me back. But he wants to know what I want to talk to the President about." So I started doing that, and dog gone if Billy Evans wasn't right.

So it – but that – but Hamilton, may he rest in peace – I liked Hamilton, and he was – he was a good guy, and went through a lot of travails in his final years, but I think that – that there was an arrogance there that we want it, we earned it, it's ours, and yeah, I think it may have been – he needed more, a broader base of experience than what he brought with the crowd that he brought to Washington. But there was some very, very competent, capable people. Bert Lance, uh, you know, very, very talented man. Jody Powell is still in D.C. and has done very well for himself in private practice. I'm – there are – there were a lot of good people, but I think overall they – they needed more diversity and a wider background of experiences than what they brought to the White House.

SHORT: In a situation where you run for President as an outsider, usually when you arrive in Washington, you are an outsider.

MATHIS: That's correct.

SHORT: How do you work your way inside?

MATHIS: Well, I think you have to do it very, very carefully. You have to – you have to show first of all that you are willing to work with the – with the Congress, and – and I think that’s integral to it – to be open to them. You – you – as I said earlier, you can’t dictate to Congress what they are going to do. You have to reach out and say, you know, how can we accomplish this. How can we working together get this done. And I think that’s the only way it happens. You cannot run rough shod over the Congress, and – and I think that, uh, some people have learned that the hard way. Reagan was an outsider, but he – he worked well with the Congress, including the Democrats. He never could have accomplished what he did legislatively without some Democratic support. And as I mentioned earlier, he and Tip O’Neill had a great personal relationship. They might fight like cats and dogs about some issue, but at the end of the day, Tip would go down to the White House and they would have a drink. And that’s the way I would like to see it be today. Unfortunately, it has gotten to be so much of a cat fight on both sides of the aisle, that they just don’t seem like they can come together to do anything that’s good for the country, and I regret that.

SHORT: 1980, you decided to run for the United States Senate. What prompted that decision?

MATHIS: Well, I thought I could win. That ought to be fairly obvious, Bob. No it was – it was very clear that Senator Talmadge was in some trouble. I saw polls. In fact I had a polling done

that said he was not going to be reelected and – and – and those – those polls were correct, and I was correct. What I didn't foresee was that there would be so many people – other people in the race, including Zell Miller and Norman Underwood. I thought, and I still think if I could have gotten him one on one, that I could have – I could have won. I knew Zell couldn't. Zell, at that time, was perceived, if you can believe it, based on his actions in the past few years, he, at that time, was perceived as being too liberal for Georgia, and once he got in the run-off with Senator Talmidge, Senator Talmidge just kind of annihilated him, but I – I thought that – that the time was right.

Senator Talmidge had had the problems – the ethical problems. And then he had had the alcohol related problems, and I thought he had been weakened to the point where I could take him on.

And, as it turned out, you know, I was correct that he wasn't going to be reelected, I just didn't foresee that it would be a Republican that would do it. The Republicans were just beginning to come into prominence in Georgia in those days, but Mack Mattingly who was a nice guy, probably about as weak a candidate as you'll ever see, and certainly was about a weaker Senator as you are ever going to see getting elected to the Senate, but it – and several people – not several – well – many people talked to me about switching parties and running as a Republican, and probably if I had done that and were able to secure the nomination, I might have won that seat, but I wasn't going to walk away from the Democratic party. Not that I had – well it did – I just – to me it wouldn't be right. You dance with the girl that brung you, unlike Zell Miller, who I think is a real turncoat and has betrayed many of his friends and loyal supporters who helped him over the years, and he just turned his back on them and thumbed his nose at them in these

last few elections, and I've lost all respect I might have ever had for him.

SHORT: Well, getting back to that campaign in 1980, financially were you in good shape? Were you ready to run?

MATHIS: No. No, we were not. And I guess all told, during that period of time, during that entire race we probably raised about a quarter of a million dollars. I was severely under funded, and I knew weeks ahead of the election that I was not going to win. And we couldn't raise the money, and I guess probably the hardest period of my life was getting up every morning and going out to those factory gates at 5:00 in the morning and shaking those hands when you knew you were not going to win, and trying to keep your staff going and keep them buoyed and keep their spirits up. And it was a tough time, but you know, we had no choice but to go forward with it.

Now, I must say that I had gotten a little bored in the House. You know, you sit through the same peanut hearing year after year after year and hear the same witnesses talk about the same problems, it gets a little boring. I enjoyed my service in the house, but the time had come for me to move on either – either to go to the Senate, which I think I would have been fairly good as a member. In fact I know I would – and I know I would have enjoyed it, and I know I could have done good things for this state, but, I've often said that making that decision to run for the Senate in 1980 was the best mistake I ever made. If I couldn't go to the Senate, it was time for me to get out and try to make enough money to educate my children and – and move on to the

next phase of my life, so I have no regrets about having done it, even though it was a mistake.

And I've had people – many people in my district tell me I could have held that seat as long as I wanted it and I think there may be some merit to that. A Democrat still holds the majority part of that district, Sanford Bishop – but it was time – it was time for me to do something else.

SHORT: Even in politics, you must follow your heart.

MATHIS: Yes.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about party politics in Georgia, since you mentioned that. 1964, President Johnson told our Senator, Dick Russell, when he signed the Civil Rights Bill, that he had turned the South over to the Republicans. That eventually happened, but in Georgia it took 40 years. How do you account for all the other southern states becoming Republican, while Georgia held on to the Democrats for that 40 years?

MATHIS: Well, I'm not sure it took 40 years, Bob. It began to happen in the 70s. My service on the Steering and Policy Committee, with Mendel Davis from South Carolina, Walt Flowers from Alabama – fairly conservative, at least middle of the road Democrats from our part of the country, we told the Steering and Policy Committee time after time where we are going to lose our seats in the House is going to be in the South, and you could see it happening. And it wasn't happening that fast in Georgia. Bo Callaway was the first Republican elected to Congress from

Georgia, and he was elected in 1964. But it was happening in other states, and – and I think we clearly foresaw it was happening here, if you keep making the Democrats take the gas, as it were. But there is no doubt in my mind, that in 1968 Lee Atwater, who was Nixon's primary strategist, made a – forced Nixon into making a conscious decision to go after the white southern vote, and ignore the northern black vote.

It probably happened even earlier than that. In 1960 there were signs of that. If you remember correctly, Jack Kennedy called Martin Luther King's wife while he was in jail down here, to say that they were going to do everything they could to try to get him out, and I think that probably turned the election. Now, in spite of that, Jack Kennedy carried Georgia by the second largest margin of any state in the country. But the Republicans, for years, saw that the white vote was up for grab in the South, and they did everything they could to go after that vote – and they've done that consistently since 1968. The way they win elections is not on issues any more. I mean, you talk about issues like war and peace or the economy and – it's race and religion. It's smear and fear. It's gays and guns. And that's – unfortunately, that's what it's become. And that, as I said earlier today, when I was in Congress and Jenkins and Evans and these guys were in Congress, you could work with your counterparts across the aisle. It didn't matter that they were Republicans or you were Democrats. Let's get something done for the good of the country. But, since then, it's like they are at each other's throat. They – they run on these issues, and I think Newt Gingrich is more responsible for this than anybody in the country when he started going after Jim Wright with all these half factual things that destroyed Wright's career. But, pick out your opponent's weak points and go after him. Attack him personally, and that's what it has

become, unfortunately. And I think we need to get back to the day where men and women of good will can sit down across the table, no matter what their political backgrounds and try to do what's right for the country, and, unfortunately, we're a long way from there today, and it's regrettable.

SHORT: Here in Georgia, how do you see the future of the Democratic party over the years?

MATHIS: I think that it'll swing more back Democratic as the minority population continues to grow, and even, I think some – some people will come to realize who now are more inclined to be Republican, that they really have been duped over the years by what these Republicans are telling them. They are going to do something about abortion. They are going to – you know – and when I go into the polling place, I'm not going in there to call a preacher. I'm going in there to vote for who I think would do the best for the country, and sooner or later a lot of these folks are going to realize they've been fooled. The Republicans are going to look after the pharmaceuticals, and the big bankers, and the big oil, and the insurance companies, and they do that at the expense of the working folks, and the working folks are told, "Well, we're not for gays. They are – the Democrats -- are against guns." You know they get all these wage issues that they never do anything about, and they can't do anything about them because of court decisions, but people continue to buy into it.

You know, I drive by some – some pretty dilapidated mobile homes down here a lot of times and see a junk heap sitting in the front yard with a Bush '04 bumper sticker on the back of it. What

in the world are these people thinking? I mean, I don't know. But I think – I think that's going to change over time. Clearly the minority population of Georgia is growing and I think they are going to tend to vote more Democratic. And the Georgia delegation now is closer to back to a balance between Republicans and Democrats than it was. It was almost all Democratic for years and years and years, and then it was heavily Democratic, and then it was heavily Republican, and now it's swung back to a degree.

SHORT: You hear a lot of complaints – at least I do – from old time Democrats that our state party is too dependent upon minorities and labor unions for support and they aren't happy with that. Is there a balance?

MATHIS: There has to be a balance, Bob, and I think there's some legitimacy to that perception. I'm not true that it – I mean, I'm not convinced that it's actually true that the party is dominated by minorities and labor unions and liberal academics, or whatever it may be, but I think that's the perception that's out there. And, of course it's, you know, it's gotten to be at least in South Georgia – I don't know how it is in the mountains up there where you are, but it's socially correct to be Republican. It's – it's – it's part of – you know, if you are going to belong to the – to the Kiwanis Club, or the Country Club, or the Rotary Club, you – you know, you're just Republican. It's – and at one time it was that way with the Democrats, but that's all been changed by these other things that we were talking about. But, uh – there is – there is certainly some truth to the perception that the party is dominated by minorities and labor, but it – and I

don't know how – I don't know how you fix that over a period of time. I just don't know.

SHORT: Well up in the mountains where I came from, you've already hit the nail on the head – it's – it's God, gays and guns.

MATHIS: Yeah

SHORT: And – and NASCAR.

MATHIS: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

SHORT: That's how they vote and you can have counties with – my home county up there now, for example, every office holder is Democratic, but they have voted – the people have voted Republican in state elections and in national elections for years. And it's that – which brings up a question I want to ask you – crossover voting. We do not require party registration in Georgia. Is that good, or is that bad?

MATHIS: I think it's good. But there are – but there's legitimate arguments on both sides of it. But I would prefer that it stay the way that it is – that you could vote, you know, either Republican or in the Democratic or Republican primary. For example, back in the presidential preference primary in February, I voted in the Democratic primary. My wife chose to vote in the

Republican primary. And I think that choice is good, but there are a lot of people who won't vote in those primaries because they don't want to have to make a choice where they are going to vote. I'm not going to tell them whether I'm going to vote Democratic or Republican. I've heard that more than once.

When we had our first really contested statewide Republican primary in Georgia, and I believe it was in 78, my office was just flooded with calls from people who say I went into the polls and they asked me if I wanted or if I was going to vote Democratic or Republican, and I'm not going to tell them how I'm going to vote. So that's been a little -- people have been a little slow to come to be educated about that.

SHORT: How about public financing of a political campaign.

MATHIS: Only if they take an IQ test.

SHORT: [Laughter]

MATHIS: No -- I -- seriously, Bob, I've -- when I served on the House Administration Committee, we talked about those days when I served on the elections committee, I opposed public financing. I ended up supporting it in the presidential election. But I have come to believe since those days that that is the answer -- that public financing is the answer. Now you have to have some sort of threshold to have a candidate qualify to receive public funds. Now

what that threshold is, I can't tell you. That maybe you've got to collect individual contributions of a minimum of \$100 from 500 people, but you set some sort of threshold, and then you take the private money out of it. You allocate a certain amount of money for every registered voter in whatever congressional district the guy is running in. And you know, they argue against that is we're spending tax payer money to have somebody be elected to office.

Well the other side of it is, friends, we're paying for it today, because people that are financing these elections, whether they are Democrats or Republicans, certainly are expecting a return on their investment, and you look at what – the way this country's being run, and the kind of deficit that we've piled up, we'd be far better off if we had people who were serving in public office who did not owe debts to labor unions or big business or whoever. If they only owed the tax payers. Yeah, I've – I reluctantly have come to the belief that that's the only way we are ever going to get out of – if we ever can get out of the mess we're in, is to go to some form of public financing.

SHORT: 1978 Jimmy Carter made a speech that became known as the “malaise speech”. As I look back on that speech and the conditions of this country today in 2008, I see a similarity.

MATHIS: I think Carter was right on the money. People didn't want to hear it, and, of course, it gave his critics something else to – to pounce on him about, that he was putting the country down, but I think Carter was pretty well – pretty well hit the nail on the head with that one and he was right. And I agree with you, Bob. I see a lot of similarities today. The malaise is –

maybe it's not as pronounced now as it was then, but I think it's certainly there and – yeah.

SHORT: Carter was a – well, as they say, he was a great prophet, but not really a savior, but what can we do, Dawson, from your experience in the Congress, and your wisdom today, to overcome this feeling among the American people that things aren't right?

MATHIS: Well, I don't know that I have – certainly, if I had the answer to that question, Bob, I wouldn't be sitting in a 150 year old log cabin in Nashville, Georgia, but I think – I think that a lot of it is that we've got to have some leadership in the Executive and the Congressional branch of government that'll get us back to doing the things that we ought to do. We're destroying this country. I mean, we are – and we're giving it away at this – you've seen, and everybody in the country have by now, this T. Boon Pickens ad where we're sending \$700 billion a year to foreigners to support our addiction to oil. That money is not coming back. Or, if it comes back, it'll be to buy American businesses where they'll take the profit from that back over there. And we're a bunch of idiots for letting it happen. And – and there's no relief in sight. And it's – it's just sad to me that we've allowed the country to deteriorate to this point. But, we've got no leadership.

I mean, when this idiot's term of office is over, he will have put this country in debt. He and his father and Ronald Regan are responsible for more than 80% of the national debt. Now that is inexcusable, and the Republican party holds themselves up to be the party of fiscal responsibility. What a bunch of B.S. And what he's done in Iraq is just in excusable and

unconscionable. How do we get it back? I don't know. I don't know that the answer is Barack Obama, but I know the answer is not four more years of George Bush.

But, it seems to me, Bob Short, that of all the people that are capable of leading this country, we've come up with some of the poorest candidates on both – on both sides. I mean it's just – it's almost embarrassing. I think it's sad, is what it is. It's pathetic and it's terrible for the country. I think that when you had political party conventions that actually selected the nominees of the party, prior to all this primary stuff, where they are out there pandering and the Democrats are – party are pandering to the far left; and in the Republican party, they are pandering to the far right. The country was far better off and had better candidates and better presidents when men and women went into that convention and set out in that so-called smoke filled room and selected candidates. I think we were far better off when you had men like Eisenhower and Truman and Roosevelt that were not selected through the primary process. They were selected by party leaders, and the country was far better off and better served by that. But today – I mean, I don't see how you ever get back to that. The McGovern Commission set up the primary process for the – for the Democrats, and how you ever now go back and say we are going to take away the people's right to choose their own nominee, I don't know that you can, but we should. We'd be far better off if we had political professionals: governors and mayors and congressmen, senators, selecting who they thought the best candidate would be, rather than turning it over to the special interests in both parties.

SHORT: Well, since we probably never will go back to that system, do you think that a one day

national presidential primary in each state would help solve this prolonged period of campaigning that has gone on in recent times, where, for example, this one has gone on now for a year and half.

MATHIS: Bob, I think most any change would be constructive and would be better than the process we have now, but I actually – and I'm not sure who originally proposed this – it wasn't me, but I actually prefer what would be a series of regional primaries, deep south, far west, northeast, mid-America, and rotate it where they come in differing orders every four years. Say in the deep south states would be in 2008 first, and then followed by the far west, followed by – you see what I'm saying, and just kind of rotate it around where nobody had it first every time. I think that would be a more preferable system than what we have today.

You know, it was going to – the super Tuesdays were going to be the answer and solution to the problem, and that turned out not to be the case. Maybe the one day thing in my judgement would be an improvement, I don't know how a candidate would handle it. I don't know how you could possibly campaign nation wide in a primary, but it would be a tough go.

SHORT: What's been your proudest moment in politics?

MATHIS: Ooh. That's a tough question, Bob. I never thought about it. Um – I guess just getting elected probably would – at the time at least – was my proudest moment. I had some legislative victories in the Congress and committee and on the floor that I was proud of. We –

we did – we did a total reform of the food stamp program in 1977 that I led the fight on, and I was very proud of that as a legislative accomplishment. We passed those election laws and after – post-Watergate that I took a great deal of pride in. Um – and there were other legislative victories in the farm area. We rewrote the peanut program and the rice program and brought them into the twentieth century, and I was proud of that. But I'd – I'd guess I'd be real hard pressed to point out any single thing as my proudest political moment. Um – it would just be too hard to pin it down.

SHORT: I think I know the answer to this question, but I'll ask it anyway. What has been your biggest disappointment.

MATHIS: Ooh...politically?

SHORT: Politically.

MATHIS: Um – well, I guess the biggest disappointment was not being successful in that Senate race, even though I knew it was going to happen, because I honestly felt that I'd be a good Senator. I'd proven my ability to legislate in the House, and I was with all – all the modesty I can muster, I will say for myself that I was a good legislator. I did it – I built coalitions; I put together people on both sides of the aisle on various issues, and there were some that would tell you that at any given time that I probably have from 40 to 50 votes I could deliver

on any given issue, and that put me in a position of some influence in the House, and I enjoyed that.

And it was – it was recognized by some. There were some newspaper stories in the Atlanta papers in the late 70s that talked about my -- sometimes called me a river boat gambler, and a cowboy and a rogue, but they acknowledge that we were able to build these coalitions and deliver these votes, and so that – I'm – I regret that I wasn't able to take that ability and that energy to the Senate on behalf of the people of Georgia, but, there again, I can't look back on it, and I – if I had to do it again, I'd do the same thing. I'd – I would make the try. You've got to grasp for the ring even if it eludes you.

SHORT: One question that I failed to ask that I would like to ask is the practice of earmarks. There have been a lot of criticisms recently about earmarks. What's your opinion of that.

MATHIS: I'm of two minds, Bob. I think some of them have just been totally ridiculously outrageous. Like my good friend, Don Young, from Alaska tried to build that bridge from Ketchikan and over to that island for \$214 million. I mean it's nuts.

The other side of it is, if you've got a railroad crossing in Valdosta, Georgia that ties up traffic trying to get to the hospital by an ambulance carrying a patient out there that's about to die, and your train gets stuck there, and you can solve that problem by earmarking a little money in the public works bill that would appropriate a million and a half dollars to find a way to get a bridge over that railroad serving that hospital, that's a different thing. And I have always believed that

I, as a member of Congress, knew more about what was best for my district than some bureaucrat sitting in the – some bulk office in – rabbit warren of an office in Washington. So I can, as the preacher said, I can preach it round, or I can preach it flat, but there are arguments on both sides of it.

Personally, I think the practice of it has been outrageous. The necessity for it in some instances is unquestioned.

SHORT: How would you like to be remembered.

MATHIS: Well, I'd like to be remembered as a – as a good son, a good husband, a good father, a good friend, a good neighbor. I failed the test as a good husband on two previous occasions. I hope I'm doing better. Certainly pray that I am, I'd like for my children to remember me as somebody who loved there very deeply and cared about their future. I've done my best to educate them and help them all I can, and I wish that I could call back a lot of those years that I did not spend with them and – and redo that time. Of course, you can't – obviously you can't do that. But – and I'd like to be remembered by the people that I served as somebody who cared about their interest and did their best to make their life better in some way, whether it was a farmer or small businessman in South Georgia, or whomever. And I think that I carried that reputation with me when I left Congress. I'd like to think that I – I still have people that I haven't seen, or there's a lot of people I don't even know. I might be walking down the street in Valdosta or Tifton and somebody will recognize me and say, "you helped my uncle Joe get his

VA check.” And, of course, I don’t remember that. In most instances, it was something that my staff was able to do, but I have always drilled into my staff that I know that this is the 500th Social Security case you have handled this year, but to you, it’s another case. To that widow woman down there in Doerun, Georgia, it’s her life.

So we did a good job, staff wise, and I’d like to be remembered for that kind of constituent service.

SHORT: Thank you very much Congressman Dawson Mathis.

MATHIS: Thank you, Bob. I’ve enjoyed it.

[END]

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