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John Foster

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Richard B. Russell Library at the University of Georgia. We are happy today to have as our guest former State Senator John Foster. Welcome, Senator.

JOHN FOSTER: Thank you, Bob. I'm delighted to be here with you. One of the distinguished government relation of people in this state and I'm honored that you would invite me, especially since I've been out of office for 16 years, that anybody would even remember me.

SHORT: Well, we remember your record in the Senate and that's what we want to talk about today. But before we do, we'd like to ask you tell us about your early life. You're a native of Cornelia, home of the big red apple.

FOSTER: Right.

SHORT: What was it like growing up?

FOSTER: Well, I was a typical country bumpkin. I grew up in a rural environment outside Cornelia. My parents were dirt farmers, so to speak and we were in those days classified quite poor. We were financially. However, I've always said we were very rich as far as our family environment was concerned because I had wonderful parents and we always had plenty to eat because my parents would have gardens and they had hogs, cows, and us. We killed at least five hogs and put them in the smokehouse for the winter and we'd eat all those five hogs, but the time was hog killing time again. But I've often thought about if I would accumulate about five big, large tubs of lard and that's how my mother knew or what did or used to cook with. And we've

always heard from the medical community that, you know, that sort of stuff will kill you, but she's 94-years-old and she's still doing pretty good. I kid her every once in a while, "Mother, if you don't quit using some of that stuff, it's going to kill you."

But anyhow, it was just a farm family and I was educated in the public schools in Habersham County. I attended Piedmont College, graduated from Piedmont and as a matter of fact served on their board of trustees. I've been on the board now for over 20 years and that's been really one of the loves of my life. But anyhow, I can look back at early days of my life. I remember when we had no running water, we had no refrigeration, we had no indoor bathrooms. We would milk the cow and put the milk in a container and put it in the well bucket and let it down. I'm sure, Bob, you may have been through some of that sort of stuff.

SHORT: I came through that era, yes.

FOSTER: Yeah, and so that happened to me and we thought that was pretty normal. But anyhow, that's the basic background that I had. I was involved in high school with 4H. I sort of picked up, I guess, my leadership skills, if I have any of that, being involved with the 4H clubs. And I remember one time, if you pardon me for getting so personal, is having an opportunity to do a demonstration on how to plant pine seedlings. I was going to do it here at the University of Georgia, and of course at that time I'd never been to the University of Georgia. I'm about as -- I was about as bad as the guy that said he'd never been out of Atlanta -- out of Georgia, but once and that's when he went to Atlanta. That was just about how confined I had been as a youngster.

But anyhow, we were preparing to do that demonstration and I'd written I think about four typewritten pages. And so we were up at the county agent's office going over it together.

There's several of the kids that were involved in these demonstrations and so I got through the first typewritten page that I'd memorized fine and I just went blank, completely blank. And I never will forget, I just dropped the dribble and ran, and the county agent chased me down and insisted I come back and complete it. And he finally convinced me to do that, but -- and I did. I did finish it, came down, gave my demonstration down here at the University and I placed, but I didn't win. But it was quite a unique experience.

SHORT: When did you get interested in politics?

FOSTER: Well, I think getting involved in politics was an issue that just kind of evolved. I've always felt like that you need to earn the right to be in politics. Politics and serving the public is a very important issue with me and so I got involved with, for instance, the chamber, I served as President of the Chamber of Commerce three times. I was involved in Rotary. I was involved in all sorts of community activities and so at that time I'd not really given much consideration to getting involved in politics, but I had a couple or three people talk to me about it, said, "You ought to get in politics. You could win." Well, at that particular time, my dear friend, Tommy Irvin, was a representative and they'd convinced me that I could beat him. So I decided to run against Tommy and needless to say he was shocked. I was about as shocked as he was. When he got through, when we got through with the race, I lost it about 3-1 and so they always told me,

said, "Well, if you're beat you should just laugh it off and go on." And of course I had really a big laugh and so did Tommy.

But anyhow, that was an interesting experience and I never will forget that I had, I had really a lot of wrong attitudes about political life. And that is I didn't and wouldn't accept contributions.

I felt like that obligated me and that was a mistake. I mean, there's honorable people out there that want to help you and you should be willing to receive it. And I thought that you had to be so straightforward with people, and that is you -- if somebody said something that I disagreed with, I would let them know I disagreed with them. And every time I did that I was losing votes. That wasn't smart and finally one day a gentleman told me, he said, "John," he said, "You know, you need to realize that in order for you to succeed with your idealism, you've got to live in a world of realism. And you need to discontinue your attitude about just popping off about what you think about everything."

And so I thought about that and I thought it made so much sense. And so what I started doing is when people would say something to me that I didn't agree with, I would just simply say, if they said black was white, I would say, "Well, you know, that's an interesting theory. That's something that ought to be considered, I guess." And I never would disagree with them or never did agree with them. So that started getting me by and I never will forget, I was at Dawson County one time and stopped by a roadside stand that was -- this church group was selling barbequed chickens. I thought, man, this is a good time to stop and eat some chicken and so I pulled in, and just as I got out of the car some folks recognized me.

And I had about a half a dozen guys approach me and wanted to know immediately where I

stood on the trapping bill. You probably remember when that Floyd Hutchins [ph] and folks are involved in trapping and about 50% of the people are for it, 50% of the people are against it. And I thought, oh boy, here goes my dinner. And so finally I just reacted with that age old statement that you've heard many, many a time, "You know, some of my friends are for it and some of them are against it. I'm just for my friends." And they just laughed about it, never asked me another thing about it and I was able to get out of there and not talk about that issue anymore. But anyhow, it was an interesting experience. And then I turned around and ran again for the House of Representatives and I lost, but I -- I lost by about 30 votes or a little less than 30 votes. That was back when Mr. Hubert Richie ran. Neither one of us were incumbents. There was not an incumbent then and so, and he was a great guy, great guy. I've never run against somebody I didn't like and so I decided the good Lord wasn't intending for me to be in politics.

SHORT: And this whole time you were in business?

FOSTER: Yes. Yes. I was -- I had the radio station locally there and that's a whole different story about the broadcasting industry.

SHORT: Well, we want to hear that, but let's get back to your political career.

FOSTER: But anyhow, I decided that I was really through with politics and I met up with the incumbent Senator who was a friend of mine, and you remember, and he told me he was going to

run for lieutenant governor and encouraged me to consider running for the Senate. I don't know, you know, I don't much believe it's intended for me to be in politics. So I thought, well it won't hurt to get out and feel it out. And so I did a little inquiring and I found a whole different attitude with people and people committing to make contributions to me. And by now I've learned that, you know, you need to accept them if they -- they're not wanting strings attached to it. And so they would push me to make a commitment to them that I would run. I said, "Well, I'm going to run." I said, "The incumbent is not going to run again. He said he's going to run for lieutenant governor." "Okay, you've got to promise us you'll run."

Well, as history you'll remember happened, he didn't run for lieutenant governor and ran again for the Senate. Well, I felt a moral obligation to follow through on what I had committed and I did, and another person got in the race, got in a run-off. And so I -- I won in the run-off and so I remained in public life in the Senate then for 18 years and it was a good, a good run.

SHORT: What do you remember about your first few days in the Senate?

FOSTER: Well, the first few days I was scared to death, needless to say, but I wanted to make a show like everybody else and I remember one time questioning Culver Kidd. Well, Culver could make a monkey out of you in a hurry. Finally, my dear friend, Howard Overby, you remember him, we were seatmates. He said, "John, if you want to last out here," he said, "The best thing you can do is just keep your mouth shut. You don't need to ask these questions. Just -- just pay attention, try to be familiar with the legislation." I took his advice and I followed that through

the rest of my career and I remember he said, "Don't get up there and talk." He said, I remember he offered a version of the new constitution at one time back in those early days and he was in charge of it, and when he presented it, I doubt if he was in the well of the Senate over two minutes dealing with the constitution state of Georgia. And you remember, I believe it Chapel Matthews in the House was also that way.

So I patterned myself after those guys and I thought they had very successful careers, why couldn't I do that way and so I did. I just really started taking a low profile approach.

SHORT: You mentioned Culver Kidd. He was a legend.

FOSTER: Oh, he was, you know, and I really liked the guy. I got along with him really well. I mean he knew that I was a greenhorn and he didn't let my asking him questions initially offend him at all. So we got along real good.

SHORT: Good. Let's get back now to your business career.

FOSTER: Well, when I started out in broadcasting I was in high school. I was always fascinated with radio and so we didn't have a radio station in Cornelia at that time. And so a gentleman by the name of Jack Bradley got a license approval to build a radio station in Cornelia. And so I went out to see him one day and talk with him about getting a job as a night time DJ, and he wouldn't -- he said, "You don't have any experience and I don't need you." I

mean, he was real nice to me. So I went back later when the station was in progress of being built, reemphasized the desire of mine to get involved in broadcasting. No, he said, "I don't think I have a place for you."

I guess I went back a half a dozen times and to talk with him about getting an opportunity.

Finally, I went out one day and I said to him, "Mr. Bradley, is there not anything you might allow me to do to learn broadcasting?" He said, "I'll tell you what I've got. I need a septic tank dug in the back for my station and I'll give you that job." I said, "Okay, I'll dig that hole." So what I was doing is getting his sympathy. So I dug the hole and then he said, "Well, let me take you down to Gainesville and we'll audition you and see what you're like." So we went down there and I'd never been behind a mic in my life and I was awful. I wouldn't hire anybody today as bad as I was then.

But anyhow, the gentleman that did the audition made the comment. He said, "You know, this guy may have some potential." Oh my, that's amazing. I thought I was washed up completely.

Well, to make a long story short, we came back and when the station went on the air he gave me an opportunity to do nighttime DJ work and so I really, really applied myself very, very much to learn the profession. And for instance, I would never do a live newscast. I would record it over, and over, and over until I got it right. And I made a lot of errors but he put up with it. And so I succeeded but I then had developed a goal of I would like to be a chief radio announcer some day. That was my goal.

Then things changed and an uncle of mine, or a distant uncle had talked to me and I was fixing to graduate from high school. He said, "I want you to consider going for me over to Oak Ridge,

Tennessee. There's great jobs over there." And I just said, "Okay, I'll go with you." I quit the job and that was not smart. My employer then was very unhappy with me. Well, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that that was not what I really wanted to do. So college was not in the equation at all because I couldn't afford to go to college and so there was an opening at the local theater.

So I went over to Toccoa and talked with the owner of the theater chain and told him I'd like a job managing that theater. He said, "What makes you think you can manage a theater?" I said, "Well, I just think I can." And so he said, he said, "Well, I'll see if we can train you." And I said okay, and so they started training me at this theater to take the theater in Clarkesville, Georgia and so I did pretty well and so finally the guy that was training me told him, said, "You know, this guy can manage this theater." I mean he was, you know, he was real pleased with the progress that I was making.

So they made me manager of that theater and so I did that for a year. I showed the very first risqué movie back in those days and it was called, *The Moon is Blue*. I don't know if you remember that movie or not. But anyhow, it was considered risqué but it was pulling people in and I never will forget, the only line in that movie that was risqué was the couple was riding in the back seat of a cab, and she looked over at him and said, "You wouldn't try to seduce me, would you?" And that was all it was. Well, you know, today things like that are said all the time. But anyhow, I discontinued that job and I decided I needed to go to college. So I saved up enough money to go to North Georgia College at least one quarter. I don't know what I was thinking about because I only had enough to pay for one quarter. But my parents couldn't help

me.

So I went over there and I couldn't compete because I couldn't have the nice uniforms like the rest of the guys. So I realized I was not ready for that so I dropped out after the first quarter.

And I struggled with it because I was not really academic or prepared well either. But anyhow, I saw the draft board lady that was toward the end of the Korean War and I asked her, I said, "Are you going to draft me?" And she said, "Yes, we'll probably draft you in about three, or four, or five months." I said, "Well, if you're going to draft me, just draft me now." Well, I never thought about it taking it literally, but she did and drafted me and I went into the military for two years. And that was a great experience for me.

SHORT: In the army?

FOSTER: I was in the U.S. Army and took my basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

And I was trained to go to Korea and so the morning that we finished basic training we fell out in formation and they began to call out names for the people going to Korea and then all of a sudden they called out my name and said you're going to Kansas. I don't know why they sent me to Kansas. Well, I do now think I know why, but it suited me. So I went to Kansas, to Fort Riley, Kansas and became a regimental parts clerk. Was very successful doing that while I was there. But then they got this company ready that I was involved with to go to Germany and so they were ready to send the whole division was going to Germany. And the captain that was over the parts division said, "If you don't mind, I'm going to hold you back." And I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because I want you to run this parts department." He said, "I don't have to worry about it." So I wound up running the parts department for a while.

Anyhow, he finally got moved himself and then another interesting thing happened was I was transferred over to another division where recruits were coming in. And I didn't like that at all.

So I had a dear friend that was a friend to the general and I told him, I said, "I want to be transferred over to main post at Fort Riley." And the next thing I know, I got orders transferring me over to main post. I got over there. They said, "What are you doing over here?" I said, "I don't know. They just sent me here." And so they said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Whatever you want me to do."

And so they sent me down to the transportation division and I wound up driving busses that are like the Greyhound type busses and I'd go down to Manhattan, Kansas, pick up ROTC cadets, take them in to Topeka, Kansas. And that was a lot of fun. But during that tenure too, I also ran, on weekends, projectors in a theater to make extra money. But the thing that was interesting that I -- I really enjoy telling this story is when I first got there, I was a Southern Baptist. And I was not happy out there going to church in an American Baptist church. And we were discussing that among some of the other colleagues in the military. And they said, let's just form us a group ourselves. And so we did, and we rented us an old storefront building where a new car dealer had gone out of business and we started a church in that building. And within a month we had that thing packed. I mean, it was just amazing how you could get people to come.

And so, we said, well we better just builder's buy some land to build us a building. Well, to make a long story short we did and I didn't stay there for the completion of the entire project. I

was discharged, but in 2004 that church celebrated its 50th anniversary and it's a full blown Bible church to this day. And I was real proud of that. I felt like that maybe that was the reason I was sent for Fort Riley, Kansas.

SHORT: Then you came back after discharge to Cornelia.

FOSTER: Yeah, I -- what the military did for me was really showed me that I was not prepared for life. I was -- I was, you know, when you were drafted I was in there with guys from Harvard, Yale, all of the big colleges and I could get along with those guys, and I could do the same things they were doing, and I felt like that I just need to be able to do a better job to get the better job opportunities. And so I made up my mind immediately that I was going to go back and go to college at Piedmont because I had the GI bill now and that's what I did. I went back and enrolled in Piedmont and then while I was there a few months, I had gone back into the broadcasting business. And one day I was talking with an uncle of mine that had developed a pine tree planter, and they'd made a lot of money. He asked me how would I like to own a station of my own. Well, that was the furthest thing from my mind and I said, well, you know, hey, I'd love that. And so he said, "Well, you find one and we'll buy it."

And so we started looking around, I did, and found one in Sandersville, Georgia, WSMT in Sandersville and it was owned by the guy that owned the Cornelia station. And so we bought it and I went down there and that's -- I also got married, and my wife and I lived in Sandersville for two years. Then we came back. I was visiting Cornelia one weekend and I saw Mr. Bradley, the

guy that owned this radio station in Cornelia, and he just to my amazement said, "John, how'd you like to buy this station?" I said, "Well, I mean I'd love to buy it." He said, "Well, I'll sell it to you." And I said, "Well, give me a few minutes to make up my mind how I could do it." And so this was on a Saturday afternoon, late Saturday afternoon. Nine o'clock I called him and told him, I said, "I'm going to take it. I'll take that radio station." He told me what he would take for it.

And I went back to Sandersville and called a friend over in Swainsboro, Georgia, a fellow by the name of Johnny Bales, used to sing with the Bales Brothers, country music singer. And I told him, I said, "Johnny, I got a chance to buy my hometown station and would you like to buy this one?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "I'd love to own that station." He said, "How much you want?" So I jacked the price up a little bit and he said, "I'll take it," and, well, before he agreed to it he brought two of his partners down and one of them was Jim Denny who was a music publisher in Nashville, Tennessee and the other guy that came with him was Webb Pierce, the big country music singer. And so anyhow, when they came down they said they'd take it. And I sold that station and then I was able to buy the one in Cornelia. But in the meantime, I did not mention to you I had bought the radio station in Washington, Georgia and I kept it a while. And, but they wouldn't buy it and I finally sold it too.

So I wound up back in my hometown with WCON and now we have an AM/FM, an FM of 50,000 watts.

SHORT: Clear Channel.

FOSTER: It's been very, very successful. I've been very blessed.

SHORT: Let's get back to the State Senate. You go down to Atlanta. I think Zell Miller had just been elected lieutenant governor.

FOSTER: Yes.

SHORT: And had given up his power to appoint committees to what was known as a committee on committees. How did you fair with the committee on committees being a freshman senator?

FOSTER: I did -- I did real well. Zell Miller was an enormously successful lieutenant governor and leader in my judgment. He really wanted to do what was right and what was fair, and so he, even though he gave up power, I was always so supportive of him. He knew he could always count on me to support him and -- but he was good to me. He, after Hugh Carter, who was Chairman of the Education Committee, decided not to run. He appointed me Chairman of the Education Committee and I remained as chairman of that committee during the entire tenure of my career in the Senate.

SHORT: Well, we recognize, John, your great contributions to education in Georgia and let's talk about that for a minute. You're very knowledgeable in the QBE program that I --

FOSTER: Yes, well I was. I spent 16 years since we were involved, but yes, that's Joe Frank Harris was the one that put the committee together. I served on that blue ribbon commission and helped put it together, and represented the governor on that particular piece of legislation along with Roy Barnes and several other guys. But anyhow, if you remember we passed that bill unanimously in the Senate, which was to me was unbelievable because it was a major, major change. And Bob, it was a good piece of legislation but it had problems, and it's still in place to this day and it's been amended somewhat. But QBE was a funded driven piece of legislation and the legislature never would fully fund it. And if you -- if you wouldn't fund it, it's not going to work well. So what happens is the legislature turns around and supports these issues that are politically expedient, such as teacher salaries, et cetera, but they don't want to do some of those other things like help the school systems with maintenance and operations money, busses, and all the other costs that schools have. And so it got it out of balance and I don't know that it's ever been fully funded.

SHORT: That brings up the question about President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind program. What do you think of that?

FOSTER: Initially I was somewhat for it, but I think the federal government doesn't have any business in education. I would -- it has helped some in some directions, but I feel like that -- that we would do just as well without it. And the reason being, I think that education belongs to the

states and to the local systems, and I think we can run those systems but we've got to do a better job on how we put the program together.

SHORT: Hear a lot nowadays about over-testing of students. Do you think that the students are compelled to take too many tests in order to control funding of schools?

FOSTER: Yes, and I was one of the first legislators that really got into testing and evaluating. I didn't like the term testing. I always felt they ought to use the term evaluate and I think you need to be able to measure your progress. You must be able to do that in order to determine what kind of success you have. And I know back in the early days when they first started all the schools in Georgia, incidentally my uncle was Dr. Claude Purcell, superintendent of schools and he wrote a book on the early years of education. And it was interesting that the teacher wouldn't get paid until the end of the year and they evaluated the students, and they would pay the teacher based on whether or not they had success. I don't think that'd work today, but I thought that was an interesting concept and that was in -- that was in his book.

But anyhow, I -- the first NAEP piece of legislation that passed in the nation that was mandated was in Georgia, and I introduced that. It's called the National Association of Educational Progress. That test is still in place and I think that one test does about as good as any test we have to compare students on an equal basis throughout the nation. And so a lot of the other tests that they give, I think, are an overkill. I think the CRT, you know, they just made a fiasco out of that this year and they were testing students for things they'd never been taught. I mean, how can

you do that? And that's where, you remember I wrote an article for the paper blasting the fact that they'd done that sort of stuff. And that's why I felt like we ought to have an appointed superintendent of schools that I felt like that people who are appointed to these positions are far more professional, and experienced, and they don't have to put up with as much petty politics. And so, as far as the superintendent is concerned I'm sure she's a nice person. I wouldn't want to degrade her, but her experience really was just a teacher. She had no administrative experience at all.

SHORT: How about at the county level?

FOSTER: At what point are you talking?

SHORT: Is there too much politics in schools at the local level?

FOSTER: Yes, but I don't know that you'll ever get it out completely. You know, we elect the boards and then appoint the superintendents. Zell Miller was involved in that and I think -- I thought he would fail at that, but by golly he succeeded at it. And I think that was one of the grandest things that we have done for education in this state in many a day. And so -- and that has helped education, in my opinion, in the state of Georgia. But I feel like that the school boards still are pretty political. Some, you've read about them in this state where they're just terrible. And I don't know how you address that. You need to have some accountability and

electing the board is probably the only way, but, you know, we get the kind of government, the people gets the kind of government that they elect.

SHORT: Is that good?

FOSTER: Well, no, not always and if we complain about it, we're responsible. And, you know, I've often used that old pogo comment, you know we've met the enemy and the enemy is us. That's the problem and teachers, you know, you remember I introduced legislation to abolish teacher education. I don't know that I was too serious about it, but I wanted teacher education schools to improve and among those was the University of Georgia. And when I did that, I was flabbergasted at the letters I got from college presidents encouraging me on and because there was a feeling that if you're going to teach you ought to be trained in the field you're going to be teaching in, and there's too much simplicity taking place as far as the academics are concerned in the colleges of education.

But anyhow, they have improved and it's -- it's better than it was. But what is interesting is back in the 1900s, I was looking at -- I don't have it before me, an article that a fellow had written and we basically started out in public education for teaching arithmetic, reading, writing and just about a half a dozen different things. And he listed over 68 different things that have been added to the curriculum that public schools must do, and what they're doing is making it almost impossible for the teacher to teach. And, you know, in QVE we discovered that we had over -- we were offering over 600 courses in the public schools in the state of Georgia. We didn't need

that many subjects and we narrowed it down, I think, to 67. I think it's going back up now, but everybody when they want public education to become social engineers, and so here again, part of the problem. We're part of the problem.

SHORT: Well, funding for schools in Georgia, actually in modern times began with Senator -- Governor Talmadge in 1951 with his program, which was minimum foundation.

FOSTER: It was never fully funded.

SHORT: It was not?

FOSTER: No, none of the programs have ever been fully funded.

SHORT: Well, how about today when we have just millions and millions of dollars being spent on education from lottery funds. Has that been effective?

FOSTER: Not very effective. During my tenure, we increased expenditures, and Zell Miller, as you know, and Joe Frank Harris, the governors that I served with were great governors for education. I think we increased expenditures by \$1 billion and the drop out rate, and the academic achievements, and all that sort of thing has not improved dramatically even to this day. And so, Bob, I never did think I would say this because you know I'm the official author of home

schooling in this state. When I went to the legislature I was very much opposed to home schooling and Joe Frank Harris was in the office at that time, and I discussed it with him and he said he would support it. And so we passed home schooling in this state and it's worked out very, very well.

I used to think that people that tried to teach their kids at home were just sorry. Well, that's the furthest thing from the truth. There's -- my wife, for instance, could have taught our kids at home and been very successful. And so, but the other thing that I'm changing my mind on now is choice. I think you're going to have -- you're going to have to create an environment of competition, to me, in public education, because we can't just keep on, keep on spending and we've got to achieve greater success, and we must education our society, must. As I used to say and I coined this statement, the ultimate emancipator of a society is education, and therefore if we want to maintain our democracy, our type -- way of life in this country, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, we've got to educate our people.

And the reason we have so much trouble in the Mideast and all these other countries is because they don't have a good educational system. You don't become a dictator with people that have a good education. They're not going to put up with it. They think for themselves. They don't, you know, there's this group that just follows and then you've got others that think for themselves. And so I think that we've still got to put education up on the front burner always.

SHORT: You mentioned competition. In this global world and global economy, our students are not actually competing against each other.

FOSTER: No, they're not.

SHORT: They're competing against the world.

FOSTER: That's right and it's sad that we're way down on the list of academic achievement.

SHORT: What can we do to improve ourselves?

FOSTER: Well, we're going to have to continue to reevaluate how we're doing it and the parents are going to have to get more involved, more concerned. You know, society has changed so dramatically. When you have so many children in school now, in school in one parent homes. They just, the one parent has to work. They're not able to look after the children as well as they should. I mean, it's a problem overall I think with society. I know that sounds like simplistic answer, but we as a people have got to decide do we want to maintain this country the way it is or was. I don't know right now the way it is, is exactly the way I like it, but I love that book that Tom Brokaw wrote about the veterans in World War II. I think that was the greatest generation of history and I wish we could indoctrinate our generations now to be that committed and have that kind of commitment and belief in our system, you know.

SHORT: I think Georgia can be proud in the fact that it's had pre-k programs.

FOSTER: Absolutely.

SHORT: And after-school programs --

FOSTER: Absolutely.

SHORT: -- to fit the students that you're talking about.

FOSTER: Georgia has really been ahead in many areas thanks to the lottery. You know, one thing I did and my colleague and friend, Bill Dover, who was the representative from Habersham County, Habersham County School System has \$0.01 sales tax dedicated solely to the Board of Education. We were one of the first counties in Georgia to do that and then I tried to get all my counties to do it. When I found out we could do that, I started -- I tried to get them to do it and some of them wouldn't do it. But Rabun County did it and Union County did it, but put a sunset clause in it. That was a mistake. And I forget if some of the -- which others did it, but the one unique thing we did do in Habersham County to support our schools is every dime of tax on liquor, beer, and wine in Habersham County goes to public education. And I was talking with a city manager one day just in a general conversation and the subject came up about beer and wine taxes, and I didn't say anything to him about it. I just was listening. He said, he said, "You know, some stupid somebody had to do some legislation and they put all the money, that should

be the city's and the county's tax." And I looked at him and I said, "You know, you're talking to that stupid somebody."

So I think it was the right thing to do because I think you can't continue to get all the support for education off of property taxes. However, you need to maintain a certain amount of taxation of property because if you don't and you go through periods like we're having now, recessions, if you were depending solely on a sales tax, you would be laying off in school systems big time. And it's -- you've got to keep your schools going. And they need to be funded. And so I hear some of these folks in politics now, oh, we're going to pay all the school tax off of sales tax. Well, another reason I'd be opposed to it because you're going to make your -- your business community, you're going to put them in a situation where they can't be competitive with the neighboring states and that's not going to work. So you've got to balance all that.

SHORT: Is there any way to make parenting education successful?

FOSTER: As Lester Maddox once said, "Better prisons have better prisoners." And I think one way we can be successful, have better parents. Parents are just going to have get more involved and be more attune to their children. You know, children grow up. They're not that way. There's not a prejudiced bone in a child when they're born, Bobby. But yet, as they grow up they pick up these things from parents and this is how they come out with some of the ideas they have and problems that we have. And I go back to the fact that ultimately, nobody can take the responsibility more than the parents themselves.

SHORT: You mentioned choice. Do you favor vouchers?

FOSTER: Yeah, I have never supported vouchers, but because of the necessity, you know, we gave people a choice with home schooling and it's worked extraordinarily well. And I'm certainly willing to try that. For instance, one of the things that bothers me is the gifted. We don't -- we don't do anything for gifted kids in this state hardly. And yet, they're the future leaders. They're the ones that are going to be making decisions of how our future's going to be. And we have this attitude, well, but they're smart, they'll get it anyhow. But we need to fund the gifted programs much, much greater. And we need to make, if a kid is really bright, we need to be able to challenge that kid. And we can make them better, and when we do that -- even better than they are -- then we're going to bring up the whole system.

And I just think we don't pay enough attention to the gifted in this state. You know, we have one gifted director in this state and she doesn't even have a secretary. And I think that's sad.

SHORT: Let's get back to the Georgia --

FOSTER: You're talking about competition. Look at colleges. They're competitive. If Piedmont College, for instance, where I serve as a trustee, if we don't do a good job we're not going to survive. If the University of Georgia doesn't do a good job, they're going to go other places and so if you look at it in that context, it works in higher education. Maybe we need to be

a little more broadminded and try developing some competition in secondary education.

SHORT: HOPE Scholarship money has helped colleges.

FOSTER: A whole lot. A whole lot. However, and I'm for HOPE Scholarship, but I don't know if I'm for a total free ride and the reason I say that is simply I think it's a good thing to let them pay some of it, and I know there's some kids getting through on a free ride that could afford it. They can afford cars and they can afford a whole bunch of other stuff, but there's just something about if you've got a little investment in what you have, you treat it with a little more respect. And I know at our school, at Piedmont College we did away with scholarships for athletes. If you want to come to Piedmont, and we want you to come to Piedmont, we don't give out athletic scholarships, but we'll give you an academic scholarship and we've got some good athletes.

SHORT: Let's get back for a minute now to the Georgia Senate where you served for 12 years.

FOSTER: Eight years, 18 years.

SHORT: Eighteen years.

FOSTER: Eighteen years.

SHORT: Gosh, I missed that, didn't I? Let's talk about the leadership of the Senate, how it evolves and some of the personalities. You have, in addition to lieutenant governor who is elected by the people, you have a president pro tem and that person has the responsibility of serving, I guess, in the absence of the lieutenant governor. Who were some of the pro tems while you were in the Senate?

FOSTER: Senator Holloway, great fellow. Tom Allgood was one of them. When I was in the Senate and Zell Miller was lieutenant governor, president of the Senate, he gave us a lot of leeway. But you know when Zell Miller made up his mind it was time to act, you would act and they don't seem to have control over it today in the House or the Senate like they did in that era. Now, maybe I'm just an old fogey and that's the way I -- you know, I'm just not familiar with what they're doing today. But I think, I don't know, a lot of folks didn't like Tom Murphy. A matter of fact, a lot of times I didn't like him, but if you look at his leadership, he -- to me, he was a great leader. He was fair. He got mad at me one time and that was when the guy that ran against him passed away.

SHORT: Al Burris.

FOSTER: Al Burris. Well, Al was running against Speaker Murphy and Al's wife is from Cornelia. So I thought it would be politically smart for me to help Al and I did. I got involved and tried to talk to all the legislators about Al, you know. And somebody told the Speaker that I

was doing it. Well, the truth is I probably should not have had my nose in it but, you know, his wife lived in Cornelia and I liked Al, and I wanted to help him. And, but anyhow I noticed that every time I'd introduce a bill it'd never get anywhere.

So one day a friend came to me. Said, "John, you know, the speaker doesn't like you." "He doesn't?" "No." "Why?" And he said, "You got involved in the House Speaker's race one time a few years ago and he didn't appreciate it." So I went to my dear friend, Jack Eller. I said, "Jack, I've got a problem. What should I do?" I said, "I might as well go home if I can't pass a bill in the Senate, if it can't pass in the House." He said, "You need to go to him and apologize," and said, "if you'll apologize to him you'll never hear anymore out of it." And I went to him and apologized and he reached out and shook hands with me, said, "It's a forgotten matter." And from that day forward, we were the dearest friends and he, you know, he worked with me. As a matter of fact, I went to some of their suppers, you know, and breakfasts, you know, they'd have ham and grits. I think you've been there to those, dinners at night and he would invite me. And we became -- we were always, I mean we were good friends for years.

SHORT: John, you know, when we were coming along there were two parties in Georgia, but they were within the Democratic party.

FOSTER: Exactly.

SHORT: I'm sure you remember those days. You had the Talmadge faction and you had the

Arnall-Rivers faction. We don't see that anymore. It seems that --

FOSTER: No, it's terribly divided.

SHORT: Isn't it, yeah.

FOSTER: I really am very disappointed in partisan politics. I don't consider myself a democrat or a republican anymore. I vote strictly for the person and, you know, I thought that the democrats even when I -- the democrats never really did anything to help me. I just ran as a democrat and I liked the republicans. Some of my dearest friends were the republicans, you know, Gil Townsend. There were a number of them in there, Bob Bell, those guys, great guys. And so I just -- I got along with them all fine and we didn't have this division in the parties in my district except in over in the mountain counties. And I never will forget being in Blue Ridge. I was over there one day and I made the comment to some folks over there, I was going to work with those that the people elect.

And this fellow came up to me and he was very upset with me. He said, "Let me tell you something, you work with the democrats. You don't work with the republicans." And I didn't realize republicans were the ones that had gotten elected to office in that county, you know. And so I said to the fellow, I said, "Well, I'm going to work with whoever the people elect." And that didn't endear me too well with him. But people generally must have liked me pretty well because they supported me for 18 years.

SHORT: You had very little opposition.

FOSTER: Very little.

SHORT: I can't remember an opponent.

FOSTER: But the opposition -- I won pretty well. But I don't know if it's appropriate for somebody like me to comment about, you know, when I lost. I was at -- I really had given serious consideration to not running again because I really was, I just felt it was time to move on. But my friends kept saying to me, John, you need to stay in there because you're going to be one of the top ranking senators in seniority and that would have been true. Nobody would ever top Paul Broun and Hugh Gillis, but I would have been, you know, among the top. But anyhow, I let them talk me into running and so as you know, I was not a union man and I made no bones about it. And so teacher unions decided they wanted to change and the state employees union decided they wanted to change.

And I never took it too seriously because I felt like that the people knew me well enough that they would support me. But I was wrong. They used some successful tactics approaching it, and of course I lost. As I tell some folks, I quit on account of the old health. People got sick of me.

SHORT: John, many disenchanted democrats seem to think that the Georgia party is now too

dependent on minorities and labor unions. Is that true in your area?

FOSTER: Yes, it certainly plays a role in effecting politics in our area, but I just think the democratic party is completely out of touch with the reality as it relates to local communities. I think Washington is in general and fortunately our, I think we have a great senator in Johnny Isakson. I don't want to get into the politics of this stuff, but anyhow still in a world of reality. But I don't know what we're going to do. I tell you, the partisan politics is really slowing this country down and we somehow or another have got to get away from it. You know, the people are the issues, not parties. We've got to do things that are best for the country and now if -- and it's getting, it's in the state level too. If the party is not for it, we're not going to support it. We didn't do that, Bob, when I was there. A little bit of it, but Paul Coverdell, great fellow, and deeply respected, and I -- I enjoyed working with him. And why do we have to be so partisan? I don't know.

SHORT: How do you feel about registration by party?

FOSTER: Well, that's just going to enhance it worse to me. I want the freedom to vote for a person not a party and I just, as a matter of fact, if I were in public life again I would introduce local legislation taking local offices out of party politics.

SHORT: That works with some offices today. It seems to work well.

FOSTER: Yeah.

SHORT: But --

FOSTER: But it's just, our forefathers I guess they knew what they were doing when they started all that, but things have changed so dramatically until I just think it's out of hand.

SHORT: Why is it so difficult to run as an independent in Georgia?

FOSTER: Because, I guess it's because of the party affiliations. I tell you the guy that's been really amazing to me is Paul Broun. Paul Broun has not received the support of even the Republicans, but yet he's been extraordinarily successful. Now, that's not totally true, but he's a strict constitutionalist. I agree with that and it's, you know, he's a little bit more conservative than I would be sometimes, but on the other hand I admire him for sticking up to what he believe. And so far, he's been doing very, very well.

SHORT: What have you done, John, since you left office?

FOSTER: Well, the first thing I did when I went out of office in '92 was I was -- you know, I used to make brooms in addition to being in the broadcasting business. I used to manufacture

broom corn brooms. I bought a broom plant out and we were -- I got up to probably 1,000 dozen of brooms a week. We made a lot of brooms. But anyhow, I found out that I couldn't compete because the Mexicans could make them, and ship them in here, and sell them cheaper than I could make them. So I saw the handwriting on the wall. So I liquidated my plant.

So I decided, well, you know, I'd like to do some experimenting and do something else. My wife took over the radio station, incidentally, when I was in public life and I haven't actually been that active, involved in running the radio station for years. But anyhow, I'm a big fan of recycling. I feel like -- we need to pay more attention to it and I think that for recycling to work, it's got to be a public-private partnership. So I built a paper recycling plant and I could grind up tons of paper a day, tons and I wanted to make chicken bedding and I mixed boric acid with it. And it worked. But I couldn't compete with shavings because it was more expensive than shavings, if you put enough in there as you should.

So I wasn't succeeding too well at that and so I decided to then start experimenting and researching other ideas. So I decided -- I tried developing a pest control insulation. Well, this type of insulation is not new, but I wanted to make one that would control bugs, and ants, and rats, all that, and fireproof. And so I developed a cellulose insulation called Insides that is being manufactured to this day very successfully. And I sold the company and it was too hard of work for me, and so the company that bought it recently moved it out of Cornelia over to Stephens County in a building that was vacant over there. But I don't know how they're doing right now, but at one point about a year or so ago they were -- they were running seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

Now, that's getting rid of a lot of paper, but that's the greatest insulation that you can put in a house. I don't know if you're familiar with it or not. I can take a handful of cellulose insulation made of paper, I can put it in my hand, I can put a penny on top of that, I can take a blow torch and I can melt that penny in my hand and I'll never feel it, and that paper won't burn. I mean, it's really good stuff and they can blow that stuff in a house, on the walls when you build a new house and it does a phenomenal job. I put in my own home, cutting down energy costs. So that's something I'm proud of that succeeded.

SHORT: Back to politics. What do you feel was your greatest accomplishment?

FOSTER: Of course, it was in the arena of education, but I got -- I got the state thinking about accountability. And then of course working with Governor Joe Frank Harris in the Quality Basic Education Act, passing that bill unanimously. But I would say some -- educational issues was probably the area that I was most successful in. I wish I could have been even more successful. I -- I'm really sad in the sense that I did not succeed or work more aggressively in dealing with the water issue. In 1976, well 1975 really, I introduced resolution to establish a water study committee and in '76 we held hearings all over the state of Georgia. I had some smart people working with me.

It was blatantly obvious that we had to do something about the water problems in this state. We needed to deal with the problem of Florida and Alabama. We need to deal with the underground water aquifer in South Georgia because so much water was being pulled out. Atlanta was

consuming unbelievable amount of water out of the Chattahoochee River. And we wrote in that report that if we didn't deal with this situation, by the year 2000 there would be a water crisis developing in this state. And I look back and that's some smart people with me. And it wasn't that I was that smart, it was just the people working with me. And I really wish that I had taken a stronger push or effort to push that issue. But I would talk to the leadership and all and it just, it wasn't -- it just wasn't that big of an agenda at that time. Everybody thought we just had all the water we'll ever need. And I'm not faulting them. There was a lot of other things on their mind, but I personally wish I had done a better job at that.

SHORT: It's certainly a big issue today.

FOSTER: Very big issue. Very serious issue.

SHORT: It's in the courts.

FOSTER: Very serious issue and, you know, out West they've had water wars out there.

SHORT: I remember my grandfather telling me one time, he said, "Son, you know how to spell water? W-A-R."

FOSTER: Yeah, yeah.

SHORT: It was back in the days when they were having water wars out there.

FOSTER: That's right.

SHORT: But hopefully we'll get ours settled.

FOSTER: Yeah.

SHORT: How would you like to be remembered?

FOSTER: How would I like to be remembered? Well, I guess I'd like to be remembered as a good father and grandfather.

SHORT: Tell us about your children.

FOSTER: I got two sons. One is now working with us. He was in commercial real estate because you know the real estate business is not too good. Then my youngest son is an executive vice-president of a bank, Habersham Bank. Very successful. And then I have two grandchildren. One, five and a little boy, and he's John Clayton Foster, III, and then a little girl who's three. Now, my oldest son married later in life and my youngest son is still not married

and -- but anyhow, that leads me to the point that as a result of my grandchildren being so small, I have -- I made a decision to sort of write a book about my life for their benefit, so that they would, when they get older they would know who their granddad was.

SHORT: Like to tell us what's in the book?

FOSTER: Oh, it's just basically the same things that you and I are talking about, just more detail and I've been working on it about three years, I guess. And I'd say I'm within six months of finishing it. It's been an interesting exercise and -- but it's not something that I'm going to publish for a whole lot of people to see. I mean, it's a family thing.

SHORT: Will you give me a copy?

FOSTER: Well, yeah. I'll have -- I might try to get ten or 15 copies. But --

SHORT: Thank you, John Foster, for being our guest today. On behalf of, of course myself, the Richard Russell Library and the University of Georgia.

FOSTER: Well, thank you Bob and it's been an honor to be with you today.

SHORT: Thank you so much.

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**University of Georgia
John Foster**

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