

Ben Blackburn interviewed by Bob Short
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**DOCPROPERTY "reference" Reflections on Georgia Politics
Ben Blackburn**

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Richard Russell Library at the University of Georgia. Our guest is former Congressman Ben Blackburn of Georgia's 4th district.

BEN BLACKBURN: Exactly.

SHORT: Welcome.

BLACKBURN: I'm proud to have you with me.

SHORT: We are delighted to have you. You were elected to Congress in 1966 as one of three Republicans from Georgia who had ever served in the Congress since the Civil War.

BLACKBURN: That's right. Fletcher Thompson and I were elected at the same time. Bo Calloway was elected two years earlier from Columbus, Georgia.

SHORT: All right. Well, before we get into your political career let's talk about Ben Blackburn. I know that you're a native Atlantan.

BLACKBURN: About as native as they get. I was born in a house on Old Hemphill Road which was the same street Lester Maddox had his Pickrick Restaurant. Of course, when I was

born in '27 there was no restaurant down there. There was a little creek running under the road and that's where my first memories came about. I was born in that house.

SHORT: Uh-huh and then you tended local schools?

BLACKBURN: First I went to Home Park School and then I went to -- and we all walked to school. There was no busing to it at that time. We moved over on Ormond Street near Grant Park when I was in about the 4th grade or 5th grade. I can't remember which one it was and I started going to James L. Key where I finished grammar school. Then from James L. Key I went to Hoke Smith, which was a junior high school. That is the 7th through something, and then I went to Old Tech High School for the 9th through the 12th grade, where I graduated in '44.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: And I was typical a young man at that time. I turned 17 in February of '44. I graduated from high school the end of May. One July I was in a Navy uniform. And that's the way we all existed at that time. I was in the Navy V-12 program, which was an officer training program. I was in there for two years. They had me at Emory, which was very fortunately close to home for the first 16 months or so, and then the last eight months I was at the University of North Carolina. I returned to the University of North Carolina in the fall of '46 and I graduated in '47. So, I graduated from college really in three years.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: I got my commission in the Navy, but I didn't go on active duty. I was happy not to. I had several jobs. I worked for a year with the old WT Grant Company. A year of my experience with WT Grant finally brought them under about 20 years later -- they couldn't survive that!

SHORT: *Laughter*

BLACKBURN: Then I went to work for the Union Carbide Company as a traveling salesman in East and Middle Tennessee. I was living up in Knoxville, Tennessee, selling Eveready flashlights and batteries -- and I was a good salesman too, I might add -- and a lot of people didn't have electricity back in those days so they bought a lot of Eveready batteries for their radios, because that was the only way you could have a radio.

Then Korea came along in June of '50 and I shortly had my orders from the Navy to report on board the Lyman K. Swenson. She was a 2,200 ton destroyer. She was commissioned in '44. She saw action in World War II, saw a lot of action in Korea.

It was while I was in the Navy that I met my future wife, Mary. She was a Navy nurse. She was stationed at Bremerton, Washington. My ship came into Bremerton for an overhaul period. We started dating and then when I left for my second tour to Korea in I guess it was around June of

'51, we got engaged and we planned to get married when I got back early the next -- which we did. I did have an interesting experience. When I got my orders to report to the ship, my folks had never been to California, so they drove me out to San Francisco to Treasure Island, which was a big naval base at that time. It's been closed now.

I got on the plane in Treasure Island and I flew to Pearl Harbor. I was living in the Hickam Field barracks in the barracks over there. Every day I had to go over to the operations office of the Air MATS -- Military Air Transport Service -- to check and see which flight I was going to be on to get to Japan. I went over one day. My name was on the list and I was due to fly out the next day. Some Sergeant comes up and says, "Do you want to -- you're trying to get to Japan, aren't you?" And I said, "Yeah, I sure am." And he said, "Well look, I've got 40,000 pounds of top secret material that's chained and locked on what they called R5D" -- we called ours DC4 -- four-engine propeller job. He said, "I need a courier officer to sign a custody card to accompany that top secret material." Well, I didn't know a courier officer from a sack of salt, but I agreed to do it. So, I signed the custody card and he handed me a great big old .45 and I got on that airplane and we took off and -- really quite an adventure.

We had to land on Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima had been abandoned since World War II. There was a storm blowing up -- a typhoon -- and every time the pilot would drop below the clouds that mountain would be right in front of us and he'd roar that thing around there and finally about the fourth or fifth time around we got on the ground. We had to land. We had to get refueled. Well, we finally got to Japan that night -- late at night about 10:00. They sent us down to some remote area of the airfield, turned the engine off. All of a sudden a bunch of lights went on and we were

surrounded by jeeps. I opened up the door to step out and there was a Marine Captain standing there and there's a whole company of Marines standing there with their rifles at the ready to take that top secret material. I told him he was welcome to it. He signed the custody card and I walked off. But I found out that the plane I was due to fly on had crashed at midway killing everybody on board. So my motto has always been I'd rather be lucky than smart, because if you're lucky, you don't have to be smart. So, I was lucky on that time. But anyway, I served two years on the Swenson, and that's where I met my wife. We got married in February of '52 and we've been married ever since. Fifty-six years -- it'll be 57 years this coming February.

SHORT: So, after the service it was back to school?

BLACKBURN: Yeah, I had traveled enough. I had traveled for Union Carbide. I had been gone for two years. I didn't get home at all during my time in the Navy. They offered me a week's leave, but back then an airplane ticket cost a month's pay. If I got a train I'd get home just in time to get on the train and come back, so I just didn't try to go. So I was one sick little boy. I didn't want to travel anymore. I decided to study law. So, I went to Emory, graduated in '54. I did practice with several firms there in Atlanta. I specialized in trial law. I tried cases more than anything else, which I enjoyed. I got a real kick out of trying lawsuits.

SHORT: You were at one time an Assistant Attorney General weren't you?

BLACKBURN: I was with the state Attorney General's office for about a year representing the State Revenue Department. If you want to be Mr. Unpopularity in Georgia, you be a lawyer representing the State Revenue Department out in the more rural areas. I know there were times I'd leave the office, "I'd say if I'm not back by tomorrow you send the state patrol down, because I'm probably in jail somewhere."

I never went to jail, but we had some rather unfriendly judges I tell you. But that was quite an experience and I enjoyed it. But then I went into private practice and I was in private practice, mostly trying cases involving automobile accidents and that sort of thing. I didn't do any criminal law. I didn't like the people you had to associate with. I didn't do any divorce law, because I didn't like -- it's not a very pleasant way to make a living. So, I tried cases and I did do some corporate work and that sort of thing and I enjoyed it.

SHORT: At what point did you get interested in public service?

BLACKBURN: Well, I think when I was at the University of North Carolina I had some law professors -- not law professors -- I mean some professors there, who were way out of left field somewhere and we got into some pretty vigorous disagreements on occasion. I probably paid for it in some of my grades. But anyway, I developed a strong dislike for government trying to run private business -- trying to run my affairs in anyway. So, I always had a certain suspicion -- or reluctance, we'll say -- to support anything that would mean an increase in the size of government or the scope of government. And I carried that with me all along.

I got my degree in political science, I might add, through a process of elimination. I had those years with the Navy and, of course, they had me studying mathematics and physics and science and not much of anything else. And I didn't want to make the Navy a career, so I had to find something that I could get a degree in and I picked political science almost by chance. But anyway, that sort of shaped my philosophy about things early on in life. And then after Mary and I got back, she kept having babies just one after another. We had four of them in five years. We were rather prolific.

And so, I was practicing law. And '64 was a Goldwater year and I was active with the Republicans. We used to joke about it. We could meet in the phone booth in DeKalb County back in those days and have room to invite guests if we wanted to. But it was decided, well, I ought to run for something just to have a candidate. So I ran for the State House of Representatives. I ran against a fellow who had been in the State House for about 12 to 14 years, I think, and I came within 67 votes of beating him. It was a countywide race and based on that success I had people come to me in '66 and ask me -- would I consider running for Congress, which I did.

SHORT: What do you remember about that race?

BLACKBURN: Well, it was more relaxed than my subsequent races as an incumbent. When you're challenging an incumbent, you can be very casual, because your livelihood is not really dependent on it. You've got your law practice going and so you can loose and it won't change

anything. But once you get in the office you become defensive. You don't want to lose because you've got a family and they depend on you to support them and you don't want to be thrown out in the street. But that's always a hazard that goes with that kind of business. But anyway, it was the closest race in the country. I think I won by 316-18 votes or something out of 115-18,000 votes cast.

And there was a lawsuit over it, and I won't go into details about that. But the Georgia court held that it was proper that I should be seated, but Tip O'Neill, who earns the label SOB and I won't use my naval terms for that. He was the Chairman of some little old Subcommittee up there. And the House Administration Committee and he had some hearings, and he got that committee to vote that I shouldn't be seated. And I remember that was a very unpleasant shock, but there was a Georgia Congressman, Democrat Jack Flynn, who told the other Democrats -- of course, there were two Republicans now and eight Democrats. He told them -- he said, "Look, if Blackburn's certificate of election is no good, ours is no good either. Then none of us have a good certificate." And he stood up for my being seated. That resulted in the Georgia Delegation splitting 4 to 4 to seat me. So when the vote came on the floor of the House, there were enough of the other members of the Congress who voted that I should be seated because of that split in the Georgia Delegation. So, I've always had a debt of gratitude to Jack Flynn for his show of independence there.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about 1966. That was the year when Georgia's first Republican candidate for Governor -- serious candidate--

BLACKBURN: Bo Calloway was the candidate.

SHORT: -- Actually outpolled the Democrat and, of course, subsequently the Georgia legislature elected the Democrat Lester Maddox. What do you remember about that race?

BLACKBURN: Well, what happened is Bo Calloway was from Columbus. Of course, he's related to the Calloways of the Calloway Gardens thing down in Pine Mountain, Georgia. He was very popular, particularly in DeKalb County and in Atlanta. Bo got a majority of the votes cast, but he did not get a plurality. Or maybe I got it backwards -- he got a plurality, but not a majority of the votes cast -- that is he got, you know, 48.5%. Don't quote me on these numbers. But anyway, he didn't get 51% of the votes cast. He got something less than that. Lester got something like 45 or 46 votes. Well, the Georgia law then required that if a candidate did not get a majority of the votes cast, the race was thrown into the Georgia House. And of course, the Georgia House was dominated by Democrats. So, the Georgia House didn't have any problem about that. They elected Lester. And Lester was not a bad Governor. I didn't have any real quarrel with Lester. I know he's unpopular in a lot of quarters, but I thought he tried to do a good job as Governor and he was a very honest man.

SHORT: A lot of people think that Calloway's showing in that election by obtaining a plurality of votes actually was the -- actually launched the success of the Republican Party in Georgia. Do

you feel that way?

BLACKBURN: I think that had a lot to do with it because his popularity -- when he said he was going to run for Governor that made it easy for me to decide to run for Congress, because I knew that in DeKalb County he was very popular and that I would benefit from that. So, that had a material effect on my decision to run. Charlie Weltner had been the incumbent Congressman in the 5th district, which was Fulton County. Fletcher Thompson was running as a Republican in that area. Well, it ends up Fletcher and I were both elected. So, we had two Republicans in the House at that time. I was up there for four terms. Lester served two terms -- I mean Fletcher served two terms. Then he ran for the Senate and he didn't make it. Oh gosh, he was defeated by --

SHORT: Sam Nunn.

BLACKBURN: -- Sam Nunn, very popular. Sam Nunn ran against Gambrell. Gambrell had been appointed by Carter, I think. Yeah, I'm sure he was. And so, Gambrell was running for re-election. Sam Nunn ran in the primary and defeated Gambrell and Sam Nunn, of course, went on to the Senate and served with great distinction for a number of years.

SHORT: Let's talk about the rise of the Republican Party for a minute. In the 50s and 60s and 70s everything politically in Georgia was the Democrats. How do you account for the rise of the

Republican Party into the majority today?

BLACKBURN: Well, I think Georgia has traditionally tended to be a conservative -- that is philosophically -- toward the political issues and the National Democrat Party has gone out there in left field so far that they aren't communicating with anybody who has any conservative instincts at all. So, it wasn't Georgia that left the Democrat Party, the National Democrat Party left the state of Georgia, and, of course, the Georgians had to turn to the Republican Party as the only alternative they were willing to support. And I think that accounted for it.

SHORT: So, in 1967 you're off to Washington, a freshman Congressman. What was your reaction to the Congress when you got there?

BLACKBURN: Well, I was flattered! I was honored to be elected up there. First thing we had to do was find a place to live. We moved up into Kensington, Maryland. We had four children. Our youngest boy was still in grammar school. Oldest boy was in -- my wife is nodding. I'm wrong again. She enjoys correcting me!

MRS. BLACKBURN: He was in junior high.

BLACKBURN: Who? David was? Our youngest boy was in junior high -- in middle school. Okay, you're right. She's always right! I've noticed that over the years.

MRS. BLACKBURN: And two and three were in high school.

BLACKBURN: And the oldest boy was in high school. In fact, they all graduated from high school up there, because we were there right years. The first thing that I noticed that really upsets me -- and it still upsets me, was there's such a lack of communication between the two parties up there.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: I mean it's almost like they're forbidden to talk to each other. I didn't have any problem working with other Democrats up there at all and I'm sure some of them had no problem working with me either. But it's almost like you've got two warring camps and neither one is willing to work with the other or even talk to the other, and that's really not good for the country. They ought to at least have some common ground they can agree on.

We did have common ground. We agreed on voting ourselves pay raises. These have gotten very popular. We could vote on recognizing motherhood as a blessing for the country. We'd vote on national holidays you know. Oh, we got those things done all right. But on matters of government philosophy, as I say, it's almost like two warring camps. And, if anything, it's worse now than it was when I first got up there!

I'll never forget, there was this Democrat I used to play a lot of paddle ball with down in the

gymnasium. He got defeated by some guy from Berkley, California, which is out in orbit somewhere and China would be right on for Berkley. I said, "You know, the reason you got beat don't you?" And he said, "Why?" I said, "You're too soft on capitalism!"

Laughter

BLACKBURN: "And Berkley, you can't be too soft on capitalism." But that to me is the source of some distress that we don't have more communication -- that they can work together on things.

SHORT: When you got elected, Ben, the Republicans were in the minority.

BLACKBURN: Oh, very much so.

SHORT: How were your committee assignments and were you -- did you get what you were looking for?

BLACKBURN: Well, I did, because I was on the committee on committees we called it. That is the one to make the assignments. Committee assignments are really quite valuable and the result is the big states -- and I mean California, Pennsylvania, and New York, Illinois -- they see to it that their Congressmen get appointed to the critical committees, like the Rules Committee or the

Ways and Means Committee, the Taxing Committee, or Appropriations Committee -- the one that hands out the money. So, the smaller states -- and particularly a state like Georgia with two Republicans -- we just got the pickings of what was left over. But I felt very fortunate about it. I got on the Banking Committee, which is very important to the city of Atlanta. Of course, we have a lot of banking in the city of Atlanta. So, I felt very fortunate to get on that committee.

SHORT: Georgia at that time had a delegation with a lot of seniority. Did you have a difficult time working with Democrats from Georgia?

BLACKBURN: No, I really didn't. I'm trying to think. I don't think we had more than one or two Democrats on -- that is, from Georgia, on my committee.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: See, we only had 10 Congressmen from Georgia at that time. And you take some states that have 25 or 30 to 35 Congressmen; they can spread them around pretty good. In Georgia, we just had 10 all together.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: And I'm trying to think, I don't think we had anybody else from Georgia on my

committee. If there was, I can't recall it right now. But you have what they call a committee on committees, and they determine where freshmen Congressmen go with committee assignments. And the bigger states, of course, dominate the committee on committees, so they can put their people on the critical committees.

SHORT: You mentioned Jack Flint. Who were some of the other Georgia Congressmen you served with?

BLACKBURN: Well, Phil Landrum, of course, was the senior Georgia Congressman. He had been up there -- what? -- 20 years or something, I think, when I got there. John Davis. Andrew Young was elected. When Fletcher Thompson ran for the Senate, that's when Andrew Young was elected. I'm trying to think of who else I got along with. I got along with all of them real well, really. I had no problem with any of them.

MRS. BLACKBURN: Neal Matson.

BLACKBURN: Yeah, Neal Matson from Albany.

SHORT: Uh-huh. So, you're on the Banking Committee and some other valuable committees. Tell us a little bit about your committee work.

BLACKBURN: Well, the Banking Committee can be rather critical in a lot of ways because we regulate the banks as to where branches can be built and where they can expand into other areas and that sort of thing. One of my extracurricular activities is -- a group of us got together of conservative Republicans, and formed what we call the Study Committee. The Republicans -- we called it the Steering Committee initially, and it was -- what we did -- we each contributed some of our committee -- some of our staff appropriations to hiring people to specialize in various areas of litigation. We had a bill that was coming up on the floor. And the reason we formed this Steering Committee is we'd have issues come up for a vote and we didn't have the research we really felt we needed to deliberate these things and present our side of it. So, we hired people to specialize in given areas of legislation, and we would bring them on the floor when the bill would come up. Now we had some organizations, and I think the main one at that time that we had on our side politically, philosophically, was the American Enterprise Institute. But we'd go to them and say, "You know, we've got a bill coming up dealing with subject A, and we want to know, do you have any work on that to give us some research that we need?" And they'd say, "Oh we're doing a real in depth study on that. We're going to have that work out in early October." And we'd say, "Well you know, this is June and the vote is coming up next week, and that's not going to do us a whole lot of good."

And so, that's why we set up this Steering Committee and our symbol was the Texas Longhorn steer that we had with the long horns and they'd be at the top of the mast head of all the material we sent out and we would send out a lot of material. We had a critical vote come up that would have absolutely brought this country to a halt if this thing had passed. And we defeated it by --

oh, I don't know -- four or five votes. It wasn't a substantial vote, but as a result of that, we had some people -- Joe Coors was one of the leading ones. Joe Coors came to us and said he liked what we were doing. Well, of course, the Republican leadership objected to our using the term "Steering Committee" because the title implied that we were part of the Republican leadership, which we weren't. We were just a group of guys who got together. So, we had to drop the Steering Committee and we became the Republican Study Committee, and it's still in operation in Congress. I had forgotten when we started this thing. It was probably '69 or '70, somewhere along that line.

But Joe said he that he would like to contribute money. And the Coors family had been through a rather shocking development. Adolph Coors -- the founder of the Coors Brewing Company -- had died and the inheritance tax on the business was such that the family was going to lose control of the business. And they, of course, had to go around and sell stock in order to maintain their control of the Coors Brewing Company, and they realized that government can be a pretty dangerous thing when you let it run loose. So, Joe wanted to contribute money to our operation, but we found that you could not accept private contributions for a Congressional staff person. So, that's what led to the origin of the Heritage Foundation. So, we set up the Heritage Foundation as a 501c3 non-profit public policy research organization.

I was defeated in '74 -- November '74 -- and I was asked to become Chairman of the board of the Heritage Foundation, which I did. And at that time I think our budget was about \$750,000 and we had a staff of maybe four or five people and our quarters were on the second floor of an old filling station that was abandoned. But that's where we started. And we eventually bought

some buildings there on Massachusetts Avenue. And when I left some eight years later, our budget was something over \$10 million, and we had our own building on Massachusetts Avenue. And the Heritage Foundation continues to do some very good work. In fact, they were known as the Reagan administration's research organization, and they still -- you know, you'll see them on television from time to time. They have spokesmen, that sort of thing, and I was honored they unveiled my portrait in December of 2007 in the offices of the Heritage Foundation. It was really quite funny. Ed Feulner, who was President -- and I had hired him as President as a matter of fact. We were getting ready to leave and he yelled at his secretary and said, "You can take his picture down now Kathy, he's leaving." I said, "Save the nail though, you might need it for somebody else!" So, I don't know if it's still up there or not, but I'm assuming that it is.

SHORT: Moving to 1968. Both you and Fletcher Thompson were re-elected.

BLACKBURN: Right.

SHORT: And that was the year that the capital clique, five constitutional officers, decided they would switch to the Republican Party.

BLACKBURN: That's in Georgia Group.

SHORT: Georgia Group, yeah. How did the party accept their new converts?

BLACKBURN: Well, I was personally well-pleased and very happy, because that was what you might call a seismic shift in politics in Georgia and, certainly, Georgia has become predominantly Republican ever since. You know, nothing is permanent in politics, and so that could be up for grabs now too.

SHORT: Three years later in 1970 you were again re-elected. But those five party switchers were defeated.

BLACKBURN: Well, they had been Democrats and their former supporters felt betrayed. And, of course, they worked overtime to make sure they got defeated. So, like George H. W. Bush, who made that infamous "read my lips" statement and then he gets elected and announces he's raising taxes. So, there were a lot of people -- Republicans -- who felt he had betrayed them. And there was old Ross Perot sitting there to inherit those votes.

SHORT: In 1972 you're again re-elected. But a sad thing happened. You were the only Georgia Republican in Congress. Did you feel like a fish out of water?

BLACKBURN: No, let me tell you, it was a great position. I could caucus. I never had a dissenting voice. You know, I could carry any issue and it was 100% of the Republican vote! You know, you get drunk with power after a while and, of course, just one vote doesn't really

persuade too much out of 435 votes.

SHORT: Incidentally, how would a Republican Congressman from Georgia get along with the Democratic leadership of the House?

BLACKBURN: This division that I'm talking about between the parties really starts at the leadership. The leadership sets that agenda and you don't waste your time talking to them if you're a Republican and you know there's no point in you talking to -- if the Republican leadership can't talk to the Democrat leadership, you're not going to get any sympathy out of a single Republican talking to the Democrat leadership.

When we moved up here to Jasper, Susan Landrum, who was Phil Landrum's daughter, she became our lawyer. We had known them, you know, when we were in Washington, and Susan was a great gal, she really was. She said many times that she blamed this division that we now experience -- she blamed it on Tip O'Neill, and I have no problem sharing that opinion. He was as narrow, bigoted, intolerant, purebred, SOB as we ever had in public office. And he wore the badge with honor. Now, you know people look at him as a big old fat jolly Irishman. Don't kid yourself. He had a knife in his belt and he'd stab anybody in the back without batting an eye.

SHORT: In 1972 President Nixon was elected, and you got to serve with your first Republican President.

BLACKBURN: Sure did.

SHORT: Did that change anything?

BLACKBURN: Well, it did in one sense. That is, the President can influence the agenda that's going to be voted on. I mean he has the bullet pulpit as we say, and he could decide what issues we were going to be debating on and which issues were going to be voted on, that sort of thing. But the President doesn't control things. He has a lot of influence, of course, but the leadership, you know, the Rules Committee and the House decide on what terms bills are going to come on the floor for consideration. And the Rules Committee can decide that a bill can come up without any right of amendment or perhaps with one amendment, which generally means that if you oppose the bill, your party's leadership can propose some major amendment. But it will be voted down on party vote. The Rules Committee is a very powerful group and as I say the -- like Nancy Pelosi now, she will control the Rules Committee and she will decide which bills are going to be voted on and which ones aren't going to be voted on. And if a bill comes up that the public demands that there be a vote on, she can control the terms that it comes up for a vote, so that you really won't have a meaningful vote anyway.

SHORT: Incidentally, do you remember the first vote you cast as a member of Congress?

BLACKBURN: Probably to adjourn the first day. No, I have no way of remembering that.

SHORT: Let's talk a minute about Watergate. You were there at least a portion of that period.

BLACKBURN: Oh, the whole time. I lived through it all.

SHORT: Yes. Well, tell us about it and how you felt about it and how the Republicans and Congress felt about it.

BLACKBURN: I remember it first really started bubbling to the surface before we had the Republican Convention in Miami in '74 -- no '72. Nixon was running for re-election then.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: He had been elected in '70. He was running for re-election in '72. Clark MacGregor, I think, was his campaign manager from Minnesota and we had a Caucus of the Georgia Delegation in one of the big hotels there and Clark came in and spoke to the group. And I remember I said at the time -- I said, "Clark, you can't lose this election." McGovern, I think, was running against Nixon and McGovern never really got off the ground as a candidate. I said, "You can't lose this election." So, I said, "For God's sake, let's get this Watergate thing behind us." Now, I had no idea what was all involved. I just knew that these people had been arrested in the Watergate and they were working for the White House. And Clark says, "We're

investigating this thing and I assure everybody here that we're going to have this thing fully cleared up by the time of the election." Well, of course, you had the fox guarding the chickens there. The people who were doing the investigating were the ones who were being investigated and somehow they didn't discover anything that would be embarrassing to them, which was a very natural thing to happen.

But as the thing continued to unfold, I remember one afternoon one of the White House staff came by my office and we went out to the Congressional Club and had a drink together. And I told him -- I said, "You know, this thing is developing into a major confrontation between two branches of government." I said, "You've got two trains on the same track that are running toward each other. You've got the President as one train, Congress as another train." And I said, "You're going to have to do something to diffuse this thing or these two trains are going to crash and I predict the President is going to lose." And he said, "Well, we think we've got it under control."

And I can understand how this thing all came about. Nixon was very upset -- and he had a right to be -- that he could have a private conference in the White House on some national security issue and the headline in the New York Times the next day would be talking about that. You know, he said, "I can't run a White House here where private discussions and conferences are being publicized, because we make some decisions we don't want to have publicized for national security purposes if nothing else." So, he organized this group and he called them the Plumbers to stop the leak at the White House, which is appropriate. Well, of course, I had no way of knowing this, but Nixon and Hoover didn't get along at all and I had no idea what the origin of

this was. It could have been back when he was Vice President or something. But anyway, they had no -- they didn't work with each other at all. So, rather than call the FBI in to try to track this thing down, Nixon set up his own group that he called the Plumbers. And of course, it was, you know, like a Gilbert and Sullivan Opera. Some of the things that happened there would just be -- would stagger the imagination that claimed it was real, but it was real! I mean, like when they broke in and they put tape across the door so that it wouldn't lock when they closed the door, and the guard comes by and peels the tape off and closed the door, and the guy goes back and opens the door up and puts some more tape on. I mean, it's a question of who is trying to out stupid who here!

It just got to be, as I said, a comedy almost, but it was real! And, of course, the press hated Nixon. They hated Nixon and they hated Spiro Agnew. So, first of all they went to work on Spiro and they found he had been taking money from private firms and all while he was Governor of Maryland, which every Governor since the beginning of Maryland had been doing. But a Republican doing it was a crime. So Agnew has to resign, and they had to get rid of Agnew, because he was the next in line to be President if they got rid of Nixon. So, then they could concentrate their fire on Nixon. And they went to work on him and the public just got so totally disgusted with Nixon that he had to resign. And Gerald Ford, who was a very decent, likeable guy, but he was not a tiger. He didn't have what in the law -- what trial lawyers call the instincts of the jugular. In trying cases, you develop an instinct of where the other sides of vulnerability lies and you go for that and you go for the kill, because you're trying a case and you want to win it. Gerry just didn't have that instinct of the jugular. And so, Jimmy

Carter, who proved to be a disaster -- all a walking talking disaster by himself, ends up getting elected President and properly got defeated in four years.

SHORT: Do you think that Nixon would have been impeached had he not resigned?

BLACKBURN: I suspect he would have. I suspect he would have because the public pressure was so much against him, and the Congress and the Senate, they're going to react to public pressure. I mean, they're really -- in a real sense they're weather vanes. They go with the flow and whatever they think is going to be popular, that's what they do.

SHORT: Do you think that Gerald Ford's pardoning of Nixon hurt him in his race against Carter?

BLACKBURN: Oh, I expect it hurt him, but I don't think it was really the deciding factor. I just think Gerry ran a very poor race, and his going before a House committee testifying about it -- what? -- two weeks before the election just refreshed everybody's memory. I mean the public memory is not really too long and if you can just leave anything alone long enough, eventually it will diminish in importance and impact. But for him to go before this -- and the guy who was the Chairman of this committee -- the House Judiciary Committee -- or some sub-committee of the House Judiciary Committee -- called that hearing and Gerry Ford agreed to testify, which was not a demonstration of outstanding mentality, we'll say. He should have never gone. He

should have said, "No, I just don't have time. I'm running a race for the President." But the guy who ran that committee got promptly appointed a federal judge by Mr. Carter, I assume, and the guy was a -- well anyway, he was not somebody I admired greatly.

SHORT: What is your fondest memory of being a Congressman?

BLACKBURN: The things that I'm personally proudest of would be the founding of the Steering Committee and the offshoot from that of the Heritage Foundation, because those have a continuing impact on public policy and I think that's far more important than any vote or struggle I might have had on a particular policy or issue in Congress.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Well, you left Congress, but you didn't leave public service. You were with the Heritage Foundation and others. What did you do before you finally called it quits?

BLACKBURN: Well, I was very much involved in the forming of the Southeastern Legal Foundation and the Southeastern Legal Foundation was founded to present issues in court where the more liberal organizations have been dominating that influence. You have groups like the environmental groups for example. They can file a lawsuit and they can find a judge who is sympathetic and the judge can enter a ruling that's very sympathetic to them that just expands the jurisdiction of these groups.

For example, the Environmental Protection Agency. Some group filed a lawsuit to have it

declared that every running stream is a river flow that should be controlled by the Environmental Protection Agency. Well, my God, you know, there are creeks running throughout America! So, Environmental Protection Agency was delighted to have that lawsuit filed because it expanded their jurisdiction enormously over what it had been. Now, when I was involved in the foundation -- in the founding of the Southeastern Legal Foundation, I said then and I say now, it's a pity that such organizations exist and it's really an insult to our system of government, because it allows -- what it says is that a few judges, single individuals, can enter rulings that overrule the whole Congress -- the whole system of government if need be, and we should not have that kind of concentration of power in the Judiciary.

The Judiciary is not equipped to deal with broad policy issues. They don't have the means of issuing subpoenas, of having people come testify. The Judiciary is limited to whatever the parties bring before them and there may be, you know, evidence or testimony or facts that should be brought before the court that they had no way of even finding out about! And this involvement of the Judiciary in policy issues is a scary thing, because you can get a nut cake as a judge and we have them! I mean, we have judges who get impeached for dishonesty and we have judges who ought to be impeached for stupidity! But you don't do that! You just leave them in there and they enter their rulings, which can do immense mischief to our whole system of government.

SHORT: You've been deeply involved over the past years in Republican Party affairs. In fact, you were on the Reagan transition team. What did the President ask you to do?

BLACKBURN: Well, it's almost an exercise in futility when you're on a transition team, because they ask you -- between the time of the President's election in November and his taking office in January, you go in and you investigate agencies of government and operations of government and you issue findings and what you recommend. But they're never implemented. I mean, it's a great exercise because you're trampling on high waters here now. You're dealing with big matters. But I guess the main thing is if I had wanted to -- for example, I was offered as part of the transition team -- did I want to become a director on the World Bank or maybe the International Monetary Fund, one of those international institutions? And if I had taken that then I would have a continuing influence, but I was from Georgia and I enjoyed being in Georgia and I never did fall in love with Washington. And the idea of having to move up there for a longer period of time just didn't appeal to me at all and I turned it down. But my transition work -- and in fact, I did a report or study that the Wall Street Journal cited with approval. But I don't know that anybody who actually took over those positions ever read it! If they did, they didn't let it bother them, but they didn't let it influence their decisions!

SHORT: How do you think history will remember Ronald Reagan?

BLACKBURN: Oh, I think he will be regarded admirably by history. He defeated the Soviet Union and he did it by building up our defense. Jimmy Carter had let our defense -- we were going to be rowing rowboats and bows and arrows if we kept going in that direction. It was a

poker game and the United States just kept raising the ante. They were building a missile defense and the Soviets said -- you have to remember the Soviets were spending 25% of their gross domestic policy -- gross domestic output on defense, which is not productive -- which is not a productive use of your resources. It certainly doesn't contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of your constituency. We were spending something like 3.5 to 5% of our gross domestic product, which we could do without hurting people. I mean we didn't have whole families living in one room sharing a bath and a kitchen with other families and all that. We're building houses and all sorts of things. When he kept building our defense, like the missile defense and then he built the B2 bomber and he built these tanks. I mean, he just really did a job and the Soviets just bankrupted themselves trying to match him. I mean, it was like in a poker game. You say I'll raise you \$10 and you've only got \$2 in your pocket, you're going to have to fold and that's what happened. The Soviet Union just had to fold. They couldn't keep up with us.

SHORT: What do you think future history will regard Jimmy Carter?

BLACKBURN: About like they do now, not admirably. He's just a hopeless little man who's just well over his head. And he got that Nobel Prize as a way of people in Norway of kicking George Bush in the tail. That was the whole reason for that was to embarrass George Bush for going into Iraq.

SHORT: Did you ever think of running for another office after you left the Congress?

BLACKBURN: It was one of the best kept secrets in Georgia, so don't let it out now! I ran for Governor in '82 and as I say it was one of the best kept secrets in Georgia then, so don't let it out now. Nobody will be impressed. But that was the year that -- God I can't think of his name. Old age has done crept up on me and bit me --

SHORT: Joe Frank Harris.

BLACKBURN: Joe Frank Harris was elected. Sure was.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Tell me about some outstanding Georgia Republicans who contributed to the party. Bob Bell?

BLACKBURN: Well, he ran for Governor same time and he beat me in the primary. But he wasn't successful against Joe Frank. I think, you know, we've had some fine people in the Georgia Senate, Jim Tysinger, for example. Those folks were doing yeomen work. It didn't get a lot of attention, a lot of publicity, but they were keeping the legislature in Georgia somewhat in contact with reality many times on programs. And you know, they didn't get the credit for it publicity-wise, but I think we've had many Republicans. I'm proud of Sonny Perdue, he's our first Governor.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

BLACKBURN: And you know, he's getting criticism, but you're not going to be in a public office without getting some criticism. You can't satisfy everybody and don't waste your time.

SHORT: You know I apologize to you.

BLACKBURN: You do really?

SHORT: I had forgotten that you ran for Governor.

BLACKBURN: Well, nobody else knew about it, so why should you remember it?

SHORT: Well, tell us a little bit about that race.

BLACKBURN: Well, looking back on it I see now it was an exercise in futility, because, first of all, I had been in Washington and the political establishment in a state doesn't really admire people who were in Washington. In fact, they kind of resent them, because a Congressman gets a lot more publicity and recognition -- or a Senator, a United States Senator, gets much more recognition than a state Senator or a state Representative. So, when a guy from Washington sort

of says, "Look, I'm willing to be Governor now." He's sort of condescending, you know, the way a lot of people -- I didn't look at it that way, but that's a way a lot of the political establishment and the state look at it. They go, "Who is this wise guy anointing himself to be our Governor?" And you take a guy like Bob Bell. I mean, he had contacts all over the state from his service in the state legislature and these contacts were deep and personal and meaningful and I didn't have any of those contacts. So, you know, I was doomed to failure. I can look back I can usually tell you what I should have done. It's that prior planning I seem to have a problem with.

But looking back on it I recognize now it was -- as I said, it was an exercise in futility. But I wanted to do it and I did it and I'm glad. I've always followed the philosophy that I had rather try something and fail than to always look back and say, "Gee, I should have tried that." I can say I tried it and I failed, but at least I tried.

SHORT: Well, you would have made a good Governor.

BLACKBURN: Well, I don't know about that! Anyway, I'm making a good retired person in Jasper, Georgia.

SHORT: You know, Bo Ginn ran for Governor that year and he was also defeated.

BLACKBURN: Old Bo was a case. You know, he was out buying automobiles for the family,

spending money like a drunk sailor, and Ronald Reagan used to say, "Well at least a drunk sailor is spending his own money!" And having been a drunk sailor myself that's true! They do spend their own money! But it finally all caught up with him and what I found amazing -- his defense when he was facing criminal charges for, you know, spending money he didn't have and making expenditures and such. His defense was, well, he never could grasp dealing with money. Well, he had been on the Appropriations Committee in the United States House of Representatives! Well, that doesn't say much about the United States House of Representatives does it?

SHORT: If you had your political career to go over again, would you have done anything differently?

BLACKBURN: No. You know, you take life the way it comes at you and you deal with it from day to day and hope you make the right decision. Now, a lot of times I made decisions based on what I thought was logical. It turned out to be it didn't work out that way! But that's just the hazard of trying to make predictions.

SHORT: Well, on behalf of the Russell Library at the University of Georgia I want to thank you for appearing on our program and am inviting you to come back any time that you can and share with us your life and your political history.

BLACKBURN: Well, I will not be pulling for Florida this weekend if that'll make you feel any

better. I have a granddaughter though who — is she a senior now at University of Florida? So, I expect there will be a little division in the family on that football game coming up this Saturday. But I always pull for Georgia anyway, even though I never went there. It's just like I always pulled for Georgia Tech. They're our teams and I support them.

SHORT: Thank you so much.

BLACKBURN: My pleasure.

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**University of Georgia
Ben Blackburn**

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