

David Poythress interviewed by Bob Short
2008 December 8
Norcross, GA
Reflections on Georgia Politics
ROGP-058
Original: video, 60 minutes

sponsored by:

Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies
University of Georgia Libraries
and
Young Harris College

University of Georgia
DOCPROPERTY "reference" Reflections on Georgia Politics
David Poythress

Date of Transcription: September 28, 2009

BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short, and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Richard Russell Library at the University of Georgia. We're delighted today to have as our

guest David Poythress. He's a former Georgia Secretary of State; he's been Commissioner of Labor, and he has recently retired as Georgia's Adjutant General.

David, we're honored to have you with us.

DAVID POYTHRESS: Thank you, Bob. I'm glad to be with you.

SHORT: Macon, Georgia.

POYTHRESS: It's where I grew up. I was born there. My family's roots are there. Actually, my dad's family came from Screven County, and my mother's family came from Baldwin County. But I was born and raised there. I've got an older sister and an older brother. Went to Bibb County schools, played football at Lanier High School, named for Sidney Lanier, a poet laureate of Georgia.

Fairly uneventful childhood. I got to about the 11th grade, and my mom decided she didn't much approve of some of the people I was hanging around with. Lanier was an all boys' high school then. It was a pretty wild place actually. It was all boys, and it was all military. And military was not optional; you went there, you wore a uniform and carried a rifle. And so anyway, she didn't approve of some of the people I was hanging around with. And so she strongly encouraged me to go to Emory at Oxford, which I did.

I essentially skipped my senior year and wound up taking some extra coursework. And I finished Emory at Oxford in '62. Like a lot of people, I have a great, great attachment to Oxford,

the place as well as the memories and the institution. I went to big Emory, finished up there. I continued in ROTC. At Oxford, I got in the Air Force ROTC. Lanier had been Army. And I did well at it because of my Army ROTC background. I was the commander both at Oxford and at big Emory.

Finished up my degree there. I was supposed to be a flying officer. I took the physical and was ready to go to flight school after I graduated. Back in those days, there were probably 20 people for every slot, and they were looking for reasons not to pick you in flight school. So they sent me a letter one day and said, "By the way, we're not going to take you," because I had admitted to a bad knee, which I probably should not have done. But anyways, so they said, "You're not going to flight school." So I said, "Well, it's probably time for me to go to law school."

So I went to law school and finished in '67 at Emory. That was a good experience, and I enjoyed that. A lot of hard work, but it went well. After that, I went on active duty in the Air Force as a JAG officer. I volunteered for duty in Vietnam. I went to Vietnam at Da Nang Air Base in the northern part of the country. That was a life-changing experience, as anybody that's been in a combat zone will say. I finished up four years, came back to Georgia.

Arthur Bolton was the Attorney General, and Arthur was, as you remember, was badly wounded in the Second World War and had a warm spot in his heart for Veterans. Well, at that point I was four years older than most of the people coming out of law school, and the big downtown law firms really were not much interested in somebody within my age category with my experience package. So Arthur offered me a job, and even at that point I kind of felt like I was going to wind up in politics. So I went to work at the law department with George Hearn, among

other people. You remember George --

SHORT: Yeah

POYTHRESS: Great guy. George was my first boss there. And then in -- I hadn't been there just about a year, and there were some changes in government. Some people left, and there were a lot of musical chairs moving around. And Jimmy Carter appointed me to the position of Deputy Commissioner of Revenue at a fairly young age. And I went over there and worked for a guy, our mutual friend, John Blackmon, for a couple of years. And then Nick Chilivis for a couple years. Back then, the deputy was kind of an all-purpose utility infielder for the governor. And one of the things that actually Busbee had asked me to do -- when Busbee became governor after Carter -- was to chair a committee to study nursing home reimbursement of Medicaid. Well, I knew nothing about Medicaid, and I guess that's the reason he wanted me to do it; but there were a lot of warring factors, the nursing home and the state auditor and the federal government was involved. And anyway, I chaired this thing, and I sort of brought everybody to the table and made peace. And we actually came up with a formula that worked and that nobody else in the country had produced. And eventually it became kind of the model for everybody else in the country. Well, my reward for that was that the nursing home people went to Busbee and said, "Why don't you put this kid in charge of the Medicaid program."

SHORT: Which was having trouble at the time.

POYTHRESS: Oh, it was in terrible shape. It was in awful shape. The doctors were boycotting.

There was a class action lawsuit against the governor. The nursing home people had been threatening to put people out on the lawn of the governor's mansion. I mean, it was terrible.

So I went over there and pulled it out of the Department of Human Resources, set it up as a separate agency, and I worked in that venue for about 24 months I guess. And we made a lot of progress. We got that thing working right. Among other things, we were the first people to take electronic claims, using tape then of course. And that was unheard of. We were moving rapidly toward a paperless system. This was in the late '70s -- or mid '70s actually.

And then in '79 Secretary of State Ben Fortson passed away. He had been Secretary of State for 33 years in the institution of Georgia politics. That department had not changed much in a long time. Mr. Ben was a great guy, but he was not an advocate of technology or that sort of thing.

And so anyway, Busbee asked me to go over and be the Secretary of State, which I did. And spent about three and a half years there. Made a lot of changes there. We automated the whole system, made a lot of changes in the election law, which was in bad need of overhaul. We developed the first election night reporting system. We did it by telephones and grease pencil on a blackboard in the Secretary of State's office. But we had never done that before, and there was a couple of reasons: One was to just raise public awareness about voting, and the second was just to bring some discipline to counties in the way they counted ballots and the way they handled ballots. And that worked very well.

Max Cleland ran against me in '83, and Max won that race. I then went into law practice, practiced law in Atlanta for about ten years doing bond work, doing tax work mostly. And in '92 I decided I wanted to get back into politics. So I declared for State Labor Commissioner, won that race in '92. Was reelected in '94. And then in '98 I decided to run for governor, so I declared for governor in '98. Roy won that primary.

SHORT: Roy Barnes.

POYTHRESS: Roy Barnes.

SHORT: Unusual primary.

POYTHRESS: An unusual primary. There were three – well, there were a bunch of people in the primary. I was the third horse in the race. Zell had a candidate, and Tom Murphy had a candidate, and they were both well-funded and well-supported by existing political organizations. I was pretty much on my own and came in a distant third in that race.

But anyway, Roy and I had been friends before and remained friends through the campaign actually. And when it was over, he asked me if I would like to come back and take over Commander of the National Guard. Well, at that point I had already retired from the Reserves. When I came back from Vietnam, I stayed in the Reserves, in the Air Force Reserves; and I had actually retired as a Brigadier General in '98. And then in '99 Roy asked me to come back as a

two-star to take over the Guard, which I did. A great job, really a great job. I probably enjoyed that job more than any I've ever had.

Same kind of a situation. Not much had happened in a long time. A lot of reorganization needed to take place. We needed to renovate armories, among other things; we did that. I guess the last big thing I did was to relocate the headquarters out to Dobbins Air Base. The Navy was essentially evicted from Dobbins by the Congress, and I raised my hand and said I'd like to have that property for the new headquarters for the Georgia National Guard. So as we speak, we're moving – the Guard is moving into that property, and it's going to be a nice, really nice campus, a corporate headquarters and a military headquarters for the Georgia National Guard.

I retired from that job in November of '07. I took about 90 days and cleaned up my basement, cleaned up my office, filed away a lot of stuff that hadn't been filed in a lot of years. And this summer I decided to get back into politics again, and I'm running for governor.

SHORT: Let's go back for a minute to the Medicaid problem. We can't forget the fact that previous to Busbee, Governor Carter had reorganized the state government.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: And had put several agencies together; one of those was our health services.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: Now, you worked in that transition. How did that affect state government at the time, the reorganization?

POYTHRESS: Actually, I didn't come into the government until that had mostly finished up. I came in really at the last year or 18 months of Carter's administration. So I was really not part of that process. It was highly disruptive. Now, I'm sure that's what he intended, but there were a lot of political fiefdoms that were broken up. One of the big things was their consolidation of printing and consolidation of computers. And, of course, that's the stuff of political power -- or was then. And a lot of people, included elected politicians, were very, very resistant to any of those kinds of things.

But I think the biggest part of reorganization was the consolidation of all of the health services into what became the Department of Human Resources. One of those elements was the Medicaid program, which then was fairly new. I'm not sure exactly when it was started, but it was fairly new. And it was buried way down inside Human Resources and was not getting nearly the management attention that it needed or the leadership. It was kind of a stepchild.

Well, it was stepchild that was worth about \$500 million. I mean, there was a lot money moving through that system, going to doctors and hospitals and people of consequence in the community. And it wasn't running very well. So they very unhappy. So it became a -- very much a political hot potato by the time Busbee asked me to move over there and take it over.

SHORT: You were known as Mr. Fix-It.

POYTHRESS: Well, I think – and I guess I wear that proudly. And I guess the reason I was able to do that was because I knew absolutely nothing about it. I had no dog in the fight; I really didn't know anything about Medicaid, didn't really want to know anything about it. And so I could take the role of an impartial arbitrator, so to say. I could bring the warring factions to the table, get them to express their interests, and then search out common ground, which we did. And so – that was the model for achieving some sort of political cohesion, so to say. And then managerially it was really pretty simple; they just needed somebody who could make a decision and stick with it and get the people mobilized. They were very, very demoralized. And because nobody was supporting them, they were getting criticized in the press all the time. So the management part of it was the easier part than the political part, which was difficult and took several months to get that kind of political cohesion and get everybody pulling in the same direction.

SHORT: Tell us about being Secretary of State.

POYTHRESS: Secretary of State was a great job. I enjoyed it. Mr. Ben Fortson had been there a long time and had done a great job, but he was not an automation guy. Every year when all the licenses were being reissued, they would call in this cadre of retired ladies, and they would type. They would literally type all of the licenses again, thousands of them, and put in the new year's

date. And very time consuming, very inefficient, very expensive. And there were a lot of those kinds of things. And so we had to automate all the securities files, all of the licensing boards. The Secretary of State's office includes the Joint Secretary of State Licensing Board that then licensed about a quarter of a million Georgians, all sorts -- doctors, dentists, plumbers, welders -- you name it. And those systems were very antiquated and really needed to be brought up to speed, so we did that. And as I mentioned a minute ago, the election system, likewise, was -- it was just the way it had always been done; nothing much had changed. And so we substantially rewrote that law and undertook a pretty aggressive training program for county election officials so that they understood the law and understood the regulations and could make it work more efficiently.

SHORT: That was the old paper ballot system?

POYTHRESS: Paper ballots, absolutely. And in fact, at that point I would say a substantial majority of counties were still using paper ballots.

SHORT: What do you think of the new system in Georgia?

POYTHRESS: I think it was the thing to do. I think we're still -- I think we, meaning the public at large, still have some reservations about the accountability. And I don't know that we've completely got that worked out yet. Surely, there's got to be a way we can get comfortable with

that without having to go back to paper ballots. I mean, for goodness sakes, we now do all our banking online; we do all our communicating online; we pay our bills online -- there's no reason we shouldn't be able to vote online with the same kind of accountability, and I think that really is the obstacle right now, is just getting the public confident that there is this accountability and that there's not some munchkin back there manipulating the system in a dark room somewhere.

SHORT: Is there a munchkin out there manipulating the system?

POYTHRESS: No, I don't think so. I have not made a study of those systems, but they are put together by people who are really smart, who understand the importance of accountability and integrity. So I don't think that's happening.

SHORT: Okay. Back to politics. Ran for Labor Commissioner...

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: Tell us about that race.

POYTHRESS: I ran against a guy who had been appointed. Joe Tanner had -- in 1990 I think Joe Tanner ran for reelection. He very shortly thereafter resigned and was appointed back to the position of Commissioner of Natural Resources.

SHORT: By Governor Miller.

POYTHRESS: By Governor Miller. And Governor Miller then appointed a state senator to that position. He -- Al Scott from Savannah. Al, I thought, was not doing a particularly aggressive job. Al's a good guy; I know him, I like him. But he was not being particularly aggressive either in terms of managing the department or in terms of his politics. And so some people suggested to me that I -- and, in fact, there were people in the Labor Department, suggested to me that maybe I ought to take a look at that. And I had made it known that I was interested in getting back into politics and that -- I enjoyed private law practice. It certainly was rewarding from a material standpoint, but I didn't find it particularly satisfying from an emotional and spiritual standpoint. And I liked politics.

SHORT: You were bitten.

POYTHRESS: Yeah. Yeah, and I like politics. I enjoy it, and so I decided I'd get back into that. And so I ran against Al. That race turned out to be a little -- bitter may be too strong a term, but it got a little ugly. And as you might expect, race immediately bubbled up. Al was black, is black. And race immediately became an issue. There were other issues. I made an issue of Al's record; while he was in the Senate, he had been involved in some things that I thought were not right, and I made an issue about that. We went to a runoff. There was a

libertarian in the race -- no, I'm sorry. There was a third party in the primary, and I forget who that was. But there was a third party, and so the primary went to a runoff, which I won -- pretty well as I recall, and the numbers were pretty strong. As you know typically of an incumbent in a runoff, typically does not win. Won that primary runoff. Then in the general election there was a libertarian. And so I had a republican opponent and a libertarian. And as I recall, that race went to a runoff -- the general went to a runoff. And I won the runoff in that race and was immediately sworn in.

SHORT: David, we in Georgia are famous for runoffs in general elections.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: We changed the state law a couple of times that I can recall. So what should be our benchmark there? Should it be 50 percent plus one or should we go back to the old system of 45 percent?

POYTHRESS: I think the 45 percent system makes the most sense. You know, the system that you and I grew up with was the 50 percent system. And then in -- somewhere in the '80s, not to be exact, the General Assembly changed it to basically a 45 percent plurality. If a party running in an election, either a primary or a general election, received more than 45 percent of the vote and was the highest vote getter, then he won. And I seem to think that there had to be -- there

was an additional feature and there had to be more than a two-point spread between the next highest vote-getter, but it was very thoughtfully crafted and I think made a lot of sense. I think we ought to go back to that. And the reason is because I think that system more nearly reflects the true political will of the electorate. When you have a runoff, the turnout in the runoff is dramatically different. You get a completely different chemistry, a completely different equation mathematically and otherwise. And I think you very often get a skewed – dare I say incorrect – result. I think that 45 percent system makes a lot of sense, and I think we ought to go back to that.

SHORT: So you're elected Labor Commissioner. The labor department is a very vital agency in state government that very few people understand.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: Tell us a little bit about that and your role as the Labor Commissioner.

POYTHRESS: Well, it's gotten a lot bigger since I left. Just to put it in context, the vocational rehabilitation component of the Department of Human Resources has subsequently been moved out of Human Resources and into the Labor Department -- huge activity, a lot of money and a lot of people. When I was there, we had essentially two major components: The first is the unemployment compensation system, which is a true insurance plan. Most people regard it sort

of vaguely as welfare; it's not. It's a true insurance plan in which employers pay a premium -- it's a tax, they don't have any choice. It's a tax, but it is a true premium in that it is actuarially calculated and it's different for every employer, and it's different from year to year. It's experience-based as to each employer. So that premium then goes into a trust fund, and the trust fund is used to pay unemployment insurance benefits to people who lose their job, through no fault of their own.

That's a very big, complex financial accounting management kind of a system. We did it very well, I have to say. When I went in the trust fund was something north of -- I think I'll hold off on the numbers, but while I was there it increased about 50 percent and became -- I think it wound up being about \$15 billion. And at that point in about '96, we clearly had more money than we really needed. And so I asked the General Assembly to start cutting that. And so we cut employer taxes significantly. There was a fair amount of discussion about, well, we ought to just eliminate it altogether. Well, the problem with eliminating a tax is at some point you've got to re-impose it. So my preference was to reduce the amount rather than to eliminate it altogether. We did that, and that's what the General Assembly decided to do. But the net effect of it was that we gave back several billion dollars to the Georgia business community over two or three years.

The other big component of the Department of Labor was the employment and training activity, where you basically find jobs for people. That was in the process of being automated, and we finished that up. Now anybody can go in a public -- a labor department in Georgia, or anywhere for that matter, go to a computer that's public domain out in the lobby and look for a job literally

anywhere in the country, sorted by salary, location, type of job, whatever. And it's a very sophisticated system. And then another component of that was actually training, job training, which I think there's a lot of room for improvement in that system. Not so much in the administration of it as in the – or the execution of it as in the law which governs it and the federal regulations. They're very loose, and there's not nearly the kind of accountability that I think we should have in a system that big that involves that much taxpayer money. I question how much value we get for a lot of that money. I think that still is a fairly loose system and something that ought to be tightened up.

SHORT: So you left the Labor Department and ran for governor. Now let's talk for a minute about that race. That was – Zell Miller was leaving office.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: Pierre Howard was Lieutenant Governor, and I guess we could say probably the leading candidate at the time.

POYTHRESS: Absolutely.

SHORT: He withdrew, and that left you running and Roy Barnes running and Lewis Massey, who was Secretary of State.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: What do you remember about that race?

POYTHRESS: Well, that pretty well sums it up. Early in the race, Pierre withdrew. Roy was actually running for Lieutenant Governor at that point. He immediately opted into the governor's race. I believe Lewis had already declared. Well, what became apparent to me immediately was that Roy had the support of Tom Murphy, and Lewis had the support of Zell Miller, two of the most powerful political figures in the state at the time -- they were the most powerful political figures in the state. And so it really became a horse race between those two candidates and the schools of political power, or the centers of political power, that they represented. I was in the race and stayed in it until the end, but early on it became clear to me that I was going to have a real strong, real hard uphill fight even to get into a runoff. In the final analysis, something happened that was very curious. Lewis basically exhausted everything. He ran out of money. At the end, Roy came up with I think 49.9 percent of the vote or something. He was just -- almost had an absolute majority. Lewis had something like -- I'm not sure, but it was way less than 40. In fact, I think it may have been less than 30 percent. I had something less than 20 percent. And there were some other people in the race. So it was clear that Roy was far and away the frontrunner. Lewis had run out of money. And so he suspended his campaign. He didn't withdraw; he just stopped campaigning. It went to a runoff, and of

course Roy won it easily, and he became the Governor. And at that point, it was after he had become Governor that he – and the Adjutant General, Bill Bland, had made it clear long before the election that he was going to retire soon, right after the election. He did, and Roy appointed an interim adjutant general for about six months while he looked around. He and I started a conversation, and he asked me to take it over; so I did.

SHORT: Tell us about the Georgia Department of Defense.

POYTHRESS: It is even less well understood than the Department of Labor. It is a huge operation. It is hugely important to the people of Georgia. I must say the people of the United States, not just Georgia, but the people of the United States don't understand the value of what they have in the National Guard. The Georgia State Defense – or the Georgia Department of Defense actually consists of three elements: It's the Army Guard, which is about -- in Georgia, it's about 10,000 people; the Air Guard, which is about 3,000 people; and the State Defense Force, which is an all-volunteer force of about a little less than 1,000. So all together, maybe 14,000 people.

The Guard is a dual status organization in that it is the successor to the old militia, the General James Oglethorpe militia. In fact, Oglethorpe's family crest is the crest of the National Guard. We consider him the first adjutant general because he was the first commander of militia troops in Georgia when the colony was founded in 1733. So it is a – it is the successor to the militia; and in that regard, it belongs to the Governor. It is a – the Governor is the commander-in-chief

of the National Guard. It is available for his use for whatever military purpose he may have inside the state.

However, it is also subject to federalization by the Secretary of Defense and the President if need be to repel invasion and suppress insurrection or to engage in expeditionary warfare. The third of those is what the Guard has been used for quite extensively since the mid '90s. Today if you join the National Guard, you're going to war. I mean, you're going to Iraq or Afghanistan, no question. And so in that role, the Guard is federalized. It becomes what we call a Title 10 Military Resource; it's answerable directly to the Secretary of Defense and the President of the United States.

I think the Guard in Georgia, we had a couple of things that I was particularly proud of. The first was our response to Katrina, the hurricane that struck New Orleans, the biggest natural disaster in the history of the country by far. I think to this day people still don't really appreciate the magnitude of that disaster and how long – how much time will pass before we have completely overcome that.

The disaster was so complete that for a long time, meaning a couple of days, nobody really understood what had happened or how bad it was because there was absolutely no communication out of that area. All the cell towers were down; all the TV and radio was down. There was practically no communication out of the destruction zone. So it was a couple of days before anybody really realized the magnitude of it.

There was a conference call in which the director of the National Guard Bureau had all of the adjutants general on the telephone on a Friday afternoon and said, "We need to do what we can.

Who will volunteer?" Every single adjutant general volunteered whatever was needed. Within a hundred hours there were 50,000 guardsmen inside Louisiana and Mississippi from every other state in the union, including Guam and the Virgin Islands and Alaska and Hawaii, of every kind of capability you can think of, medical, cooks, road-clearing equipment, engineers, communicators, aviation, trucks; anything that you could think of was in there. And that did not include the local Guard people, the Mississippi and the Louisiana Guard people. These were 50,000 people from around the country were in there in less than a hundred hours.

Stabilized the situation and immediately began cleanup, began building kind of an organizational infrastructure. And then quickly withdrew and melted back to the places that they could come from. But that response by the National Guard was in my judgment key to the recovery of the Gulf Coast from Katrina.

The other big mission we had was the G8 Summit on Sea Island. That was – most folks don't understand it, but that was the biggest domestic security mission in the history of the country. We had the heads of state from I think 20-something countries, lots of highly, highly visible political leaders from all over the world -- not just the eight countries, but from all over Africa and South American and everything. They flew into Savannah International; they flew into Hunter; some of them flew into Glynco in Glynn County. We were responsible – the National Guard -- had responsibility for a big piece of that. Actually, North Com/Northern Command, which is a U.S. combined command of the Department of Defense, had the overall security mission, but it was an enormously complex activity involving the Secret Service, all branches of the military, the National Guard, police. We had a huge role in that from both a management

standpoint as well as the execution standpoint, and it went off flawlessly. And everybody in the Guard remains very proud about that.

SHORT: So you were commander of the National Guard in Georgia at a very historic time. In addition to deploying troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, you also had Kosovo and Bosnia.

POYTHRESS: Bosnia, correct. We deployed the 48th Infantry Brigade, or at least a big piece of it, to Bosnia very shortly after I came on board. I think we sent them – we deployed them in I think '99 or maybe 2000. That was a big thing for us. There's a lot of history here, but in the first Gulf War in the early '90s, the 48th Brigade, which is our go-to-war unit -- it's our big go-to-war unit; it's like a small army. It's got everything in it: medical, communication, transportation, whatever, as well as combat, the tanks and the Bradley Fighting Vehicles. It was tagged to go to Iraq. There were a lot of discussions, shall we say, between the Guard and the active component army about how ready they were. And frankly, there was a lot of opinion on the Georgia side that the active duty army just didn't want a guard unit with them in combat. They didn't want to share the glory; they didn't want them out there. They wanted to be the heroes of the war. And the brigade went to California to train, and they trained and trained and trained and never were deployed. The war was over before they were announced ready to go. There was a lot of ill will, a lot of bad feeling about that -- still is, frankly. The brigade's deployment to Bosnia erased most of that because we trained them up, they were ready to go. They went over there, they did a great job, kept the peace, did a lot of humanitarian

work, a lot of infrastructure, bridge-building, that kind of thing. And did a great job and came home. So that dispelled some of – the ghost of Gulf I to a large extent. And then, following up, the brigade likewise has gone to Iraq. They did a great job over there. They're online to go to Afghanistan in the spring of '09.

SHORT: So then you retired after earning your third star. I'm sure you're proud of that.

POYTHRESS: I am, I am. Georgia is one of I think only two or three states where the adjutant general can be a three-star. I believe Texas and maybe Maryland and Georgia all authorize a three-star. I think I'm the only one that ever actually wore three stars.

SHORT: That decision was made by who?

POYTHRESS: Well, I asked for our law to be changed back early on for a number of reasons. One is I thought the adjutant general should be a three-star job -- it is. More importantly and more near term, I wanted my two subordinate commanders to be two stars, the army commander and the air commander. We were getting to a situation where you have what's called a grade inversion where you have people that were higher ranked working for people who were lower ranked, not a good situation. So we needed to completely restructure the rank structure. So I asked the General Assembly to do that, and they did it. And then a couple years later, Governor Perdue promoted me to the third star.

SHORT: So, now you're out of politics, so to speak, and –

POYTHRESS: Or back in it.

SHORT: – out of the military.

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: I was going to ask you this question: What's ahead for David Poythress?

POYTHRESS: Well, I'm in the governor's race for the 2010 election. It's now the summer or the late autumn of '08. We just finished the Presidential election and the Senatorial election in Georgia. I think the signs are good for a conservative democrat with a proven record of performance to come back and take over the governor's office again. I think there's a fairly high level of dissatisfaction with what the voters have gotten in the way of government over the last several years. I think a lot of people have been voting republican for more or less doctrinal reasons, which are good and fine, but -- doctrine is fine, but you've got a good government as well. And I think a lot of people are looking now more at the pragmatics. We just want somebody who can do the job, somebody who has got a proven record of performance. I think that's me.

SHORT: You've been a loyal democrat for many years.

POYTHRESS: And it's not always been easy.

SHORT: The scenario has changed. Republicans are now in solid control, I think you'll agree, of state government. What happened to cause that?

POYTHRESS: Well, I think the story's been told many times by Sam Nunn and by Zell Miller - - Bill Clinton actually I think told the same story. The democratic party nationally continued to drift farther and farther to the left. And more and more Georgians - as time went by and we became removed from those generations who actually remembered the Civil War, who remembered parents who were in the Civil War -- and I grew up with some of those people. The Civil War, in my childhood, was not that far removed. I mean -- well, it was 80-something years, but still there were people who remembered people, who remembered people, who had been in the war. And the southern commitment to the democratic party was still extremely loyal and extremely deep.

As Georgia changed, as those generations died out, as more people moved in from outside the country, I think the values didn't change but more people just said, "Well, my values really are more like the republican party than they are this democratic party, which has continued to drift to the left." And I think that's exactly what happened. A lot of people who had been voting

democratic just switched over and became republican. They didn't really change what they believed; the parties just moved.

SHORT: We hear that often among democrats. You know, "I didn't leave the democratic party, the democratic party left me."

POYTHRESS: Right.

SHORT: And you think that's an accurate definition?

POYTHRESS: I do. I think that is exactly it. Now, having said that though, I sense a reversal of that trend with the events that have gone on in Georgia and nationally over the last few years. I think a lot of people are beginning to rethink the importance of some of these doctrinaire political philosophy issues and are looking more at the pragmatics of who can run government, who can run a fiscally conservative socially moderate government. And in my judgment, that more nearly fits a democratic candidate, a conservative democratic candidate, than it does an extremely far right wing republican candidate.

SHORT: So you think that Georgia democrats can recover?

POYTHRESS: I do. I do.

SHORT: How quickly?

POYTHRESS: I think we will win the governor's race in 2010. I think we should have done much better in the General Assembly races this year than we did. We left I think 80-something seats unchallenged -- not good. Not good. There are a lot of good people out there who could have been recruited for those races. They might not have won every one, but at least we could have made them competitive. I think the party leadership needs to reengage on that. I think we can pick up a lot of seats next time around.

SHORT: You've been associated with a lot of prominent politicians in the state of Georgia. I'd like to ask you about a few of them if you don't mind.

POYTHRESS: Sure.

SHORT: Let's start with Jimmy Carter.

POYTHRESS: President Carter, then Governor Carter, appointed me to my first political job, which was Deputy Commissioner of Revenue. I didn't work with him real closely. I can remember early on going to some of those morning meetings during the General Assembly. Jordan was pretty much the straw boss. Jody Powell was there. There were morning strategy

meetings. Some of the – one of the great meetings I recall was Denmark Groover was – Jimmy was not particularly popular when he was a governor, as you may recall. He had alienated a lot of members of the General Assembly, largely over reorganization. And he, frankly, had trouble finding a floor leader in the House. And Denmark Groover, who was from Macon and a storied figure in Georgia politics, had somehow become sort of his de facto floor leader. And so Denmark would kind of sneak into these morning meetings at 7:00 in the morning so nobody would know he was there in the back offices of the governor's office. And we would – they, I was a kid at the time. I was representing the Labor Department -- the Revenue Department. But they would plot strategy on various pieces of legislation, and I was engaged at some point. I was handling all the tax legislation.

But one morning they were trying to get Denmark to get very visible on this one piece of legislation, and he was – he was very sensitive about his position, how closely he – he really didn't want to be too closely allied with the governor. And at one point he said, "Daggum, " he said, "I may be a whore in church but don't make me sit on the front pew."

SHORT: He was a character, Denny. How about George Busbee? We talked about George earlier.

POYTHRESS: George Busbee became governor after I had been deputy revenue commissioner for a couple of years. He appointed – he wanted to appoint his commissioner of revenue, John Blackmon, our good friend, went into law practice. Nick Chilivis, whom I had actually know

before through my brother – he and my brother are nearer contemporaries and friends. And Nick became the revenue commissioner. Nick asked me to stay, and I did. I didn't work terribly closely with Busbee. I guess I probably did more socializing with him. I wound up going to Savannah with him several times to the St. Patrick's Day parade and riding in the parade and going to church and going to some of those Irish clubs on St. Patrick's Day morning.

SHORT: He was given a grade as an excellent governor. He did a lot of things to improve the economic condition of Georgia.

POYTHRESS: He did. He did, and I think if one were to pick the defining characteristic of his administration, I think that would be it. He was a – he traveled quite a lot. He did it I think very well, particularly in Japan. And bear in mind this was – the world was a very different place then; going to Japan was a very highly unusual thing. And he spent a lot of time in the Far East and elsewhere in the world bringing foreign – direct foreign investment into Georgia. Georgia at one time had more direct Japanese investment than any state in the country except California. And that was largely due to Busbee's efforts.

SHORT: When you look back over Georgia's political history, David, what do you think has been most responsible for Georgia becoming the empire state of the South?

POYTHRESS: Well, I guess it's been a happy confluence of a number of factors: geography, if

nothing else. Georgia, particularly Atlanta being an obvious transportation node between Florida, the eastern seaboard, and the southern Appalachian part of the country, Georgia has abundant natural resources, water – although water is becoming a little bit of a problem. But Georgia is just very well suited from a purely geographical natural resources standpoint. Second, and I guess more important, is we've just had great leadership. We've had great leadership in the Senate with Walter George, with Sam Nunn, with Senator Russell. We've had good governors, going back all the way to Ellis Arnall, who was a very, very forward-thinking governor back in the early '40s. And governors like Busbees and Joe Frank Harris and others who have brought a steady business-like mature sensible kind of judgment to Georgia government and leading Georgia into the future. And I think about things like the port of Savannah, obviously a huge infrastructure commitment that took place over decades, and is ongoing. Things like the World Congress Center, huge investment that required somebody with a lot of fortitude and a lot of vision to step up and say, "Yeah, we will commit to do this." That kind of leadership has served Georgia extremely well.

SHORT: Getting back to governors, talk to us a little bit about Joe Frank Harris.

POYTHRESS: I knew Joe Frank better when he was in the General Assembly and chaired the House Appropriations Committee. I went as an agency head. I went before that committee many times to testify about the budget. And I enjoyed working with him in that context. He was elected governor in the same election where I stopped being Secretary of State and went into

private law practice. So I did not work with him in his role as governor practically at all. But if I had to pick the defining characteristic of his administration, it would be education, specifically QBE, Quality Basic Education, which is still pretty much the benchmark for how education is administered and measured in Georgia.

SHORT: Zell Miller.

POYTHRESS: Lottery, of course, defining characteristic. And I think the lottery, to be fair, you can't just say the lottery; you've got to say the lottery/education because that's how it was sold, and that's how it's been administered, to everybody's credit. To this day, people cannot believe me when I tell them that college education in Georgia is free if you maintain the grades. And I think we – we almost take for granted something that is extremely unusual anywhere in the world, and that is publicly-funded college education paid for by the lottery.

SHORT: Roy Barnes.

POYTHRESS: I think history will judge Roy well as governor. I think he made some political missteps that cost him the election. I think as governor his instincts were right. I think he was trying to improve education. I think he said some things and maybe did some things that undermined that intent. I think he will be judged on balance very well, but he managed to make several large groups of people angry at the same time. That happened to be election time, and he

lost the race.

SHORT: Sonny Perdue.

POYTHRESS: Governor Perdue I think – I think he, as other commentators have said, I think he may have taken a note from Governor Barnes and has purposely been fairly low key in the changes that he has made in government. His stated program is for Georgia to be one of the – one of or perhaps the best managed governments in the country. I don't think we're there yet. I think we've got a long way to go. But his administration has been much more inwardly focused I think than the others we've talked about.

SHORT: As you look back on your career, both political and military, would you have done anything differently?

POYTHRESS: Not really, I don't think so. Fundamentally, I don't think I would have made any big differences.

SHORT: You couldn't have mustered a stronger gubernatorial campaign?

POYTHRESS: Well, if it was one turning point, I would rather have been reelected as Secretary of State in '83 and continued in that role. But, you know, God does things in his own way.

SHORT: David, would you have stayed there all these years?

POYTHRESS: No. No. I would have probably stayed one more term and then run for governor. And I might not have won because Zell would have probably been in that race, or Joe Frank would have been in that race. But I would not have wanted to be in that or any job for the rest of my life. I have been blessed by moving from one really interesting and challenging job to another my whole career, and I wouldn't see me ever hunkering down into one job and staying there for a long period of time.

SHORT: Not even the military?

POYTHRESS: No, not really. I think the commander of the National Guard was probably the longest job I ever held. I was there from '99 until the end of '07. But even then it was time to move on. I still enjoyed it, but every organization needs a change in leadership from time to time. And I needed to move on. I needed to turn over the reigns to somebody else and then move on to something else in my life.

SHORT: Which is what you're doing now?

POYTHRESS: Which is what I'm doing now.

SHORT: What do you feel is your greatest accomplishment?

POYTHRESS: Well, that's interesting. I don't know that I've ever actually thought about that.

I have a wonderful wife and son, and that's a big accomplishment I think, to have a successful marriage and a happy family. Politically, I guess -- I don't know, Bob. It's hard to say. I'm very proud of reorganizing the Department of Defense. I was very proud about reorganizing the Secretary of State's office. I think, if I had to pick between the two, I would say reorganizing the Secretary of State's office was probably the more important in the big picture of things.

SHORT: Your biggest disappointment?

POYTHRESS: Well, I guess the biggest disappointment was losing the Secretary of State race in '83. I had been raised to think that if you work hard and keep your nose clean you always win. And unfortunately, that's not always the case. Max is a great guy and a friend of mine, but in politics that's not always the way it works out. I would like to have won that race and stayed in politics. On the other hand, I think that ten years that I was in the private sector brought me a lot in terms of my own learning and my own development.

SHORT: We haven't talked about that. Let's talk about that for a minute. What did you do during that ten-year absence from politics?

POYTHRESS: I practiced law. I went with a big national law firm in Atlanta for a couple of years doing bond work. The tax law changed, and bond work wasn't as attractive as it had been in the past. I was engaged by the Medical Association of Georgia to help them create an insurance company, which I did, and then ran it for about a year. And then I went with Nick Chilivis -- Nick and I had stayed in contact after he left the revenue department. We had stayed in contact and had remained friends. And so I joined his firm in the mid '80s I guess, and we were doing mostly tax work, public utility property tax work. And I was there until '92 when I decided to get back into politics.

SHORT: Briefly tell us how you plan to win the governor's race in 2010.

POYTHRESS: Well, more and more as I talk to Georgians, I am coming across people who are eschewing party commitments. There are a lot of people that I come across who are saying, "Gee, I was raised a democrat, I voted democratic all my life until about the last ten years; I've been voting republican -- " because of this shift in the party that we talked about. "But I'm not exactly satisfied with what I've gotten in the last few years in the way of government." I think that's true both nationally and in Georgia. There's a considerable dissatisfaction with the fact that the republican leadership in the state is pretty clearly gridlocked. Nothing much has happened in the General Assembly for a long time. And there is a considerable wellspring of sentiment that says, "Look, we just want somebody who can run the government, somebody who

can lead, somebody with a proven record of accomplishment, and let's forget about party doctrine, let's forget about some of this high-flown political philosophy, let's just get back to pragmatics." And I think that will lead voters toward a proven fiscally conservative socially moderate democrat. And that's me. That's my political persona. That's what I've always been.

SHORT: Have we forgotten anything?

POYTHRESS: I think we've covered it. I think we've covered it. One of my ongoing passions I guess is the state YMCA of Georgia. Since I was Secretary of State, I have stayed on that board, and I've enjoyed working with them. We've had some good times and some bad times. Times there are getting better. It is a youth leadership development focused on politics and government leadership, and it's a quiet low-key type of activity, but every year hundreds and hundreds of Georgia kids go to the General Assembly, sit in those seats, pass legislation. They sit on the benches. They decide cases. They perform as mock journalists, mock lobbyists. Those kids are getting the nearest thing to a real-life taste of politics and what it means to be a political leader. They are self-identified. They come there on their own because of their interest in politics and government and service. And I'm extremely proud of that organization. I guess if you ask me the thing that I'm the most proud of, that probably would be it. Nothing that I've accomplished but being able to support that organization and helping develop these succeeding generations of leadership for Georgia.

SHORT: Well, David, you've certainly had a wonderful career -- two careers, politics and military. And we appreciate very much your being here. I want to thank you on behalf of the Richard B. Russell Library and the University of Georgia and myself for being our guest.

POYTHRESS: Thank you, Bob. Glad to be with you.

[END OF RECORDING]

**University of Georgia
David Poythress**

Page PAGE 29

**3525 Piedmont Road, N.E.
Eight Piedmont Center, Suite 310
Atlanta, Georgia 30305
800-872-6079
FAX 404-873-0415
www.wordzx.com**