

George Berry interviewed by Bob Short
2009 February 2
Atlanta, GA
Reflections on Georgia Politics
ROGP-071
Original: video, 62 minutes

sponsored by:

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

University of Georgia
Reflections on Georgia Politics
DOCPROPERTY "reference" George Berry

Date of Transcription: June 28, 2009

BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by Young Harris College, the Richard B. Russell Library, and the University of Georgia. We are delighted today to have with us Mr. George Berry, former city of Atlanta official, former state – I'm sorry -- state industry and trade commissioner and a good friend for many years. George, welcome.

GEORGE BERRY: Thank you, Bob.

SHORT: Grew up in Union County.

BERRY: I did. I grew up first of all in Blairsville. My father was a rural mail carrier and he died when I was very young -- just turned six years old. Had a sister 14 months younger than me. My mother, who had married young, was in her early 20s and she didn't know what to do. None of us knew what to do. And I went to live with my grandparents, George and Meribel Crawford. They lived out on Coosa Creek just south of Blairsville on the Mulky Gap Road. And probably in my early years those two folks were the biggest influence on me, growing up on that little old farm out there. And then my mother remarried and learned to – she became a beautician. She went to school over in Gainesville and was able to make a living and then married a man named Frank Penlin and he built a house in Blairsville. So, I went back – went back to town as it were, for my – during my high school years. And growing up in Blairsville in

the 40s and 50s was a great experience. I wouldn't -- wouldn't trade that for -- for anything. It was quite an isolated place in those days. We weren't as touched by the world's problems as the Blairsville of today.

SHORT: So you went to school – public schools in Blairsville.

BERRY: I did. I went to the elementary school and we – some of the buildings were rather tumbled down at that time. We had a building that was the Blairsville Collegiate Institute building that dated from -- before the turn of the century I think. It was an old rickety wooden building and then the high school was a brick building, but it burned. And so, we had to spend a year or so while a new school was built taking classes in various places in town. In fact, part of my sixth grade, I believe, was at the Legion Hall at Blairsville, which was right on top of the hill there before you go down into Blairsville on Highway 19-129 at the time. And so, then we had a new school. I think the building still exists today as a administrative building for the county and – but the big thing that happened was we had a big metal building go up, which was our gymnasium. The first indoor gymnasium that any of us had ever seen and we were able to play basketball indoors, which was quite a deal. But it was – we had some good teachers, some good dedicated teachers and I enjoyed my schooling and learned to love books, learned to read, learned to pay attention to books, which have been a lifelong love of mine.

SHORT: So after high school you attended Young Harris College.

BERRY: I did. I went to Young Harris in 1955 along with quite a number of my classmates at Union County High School and it was a great experience there. You – it's interesting, because I knew so many people already from Union County, but got to know all my classmates because we of a relatively small number of students in Young Harris at that time. So you got to know everybody, and again, the isolation factor. No movie theatre, nothing to do off campus, so you're thrown together with your classmates. You become lifelong friends with many of them. And of course, invariably – didn't happen to me, but invariably there were a tremendous number of weddings.

SHORT: *Laughter*

BERRY: People would get to know each other and get married because of their experience at Young Harris.

SHORT: And it was after your graduation at Young Harris that you first came to Atlanta.

BERRY: Yes, not immediately. I tried to go to the University of Georgia as a matter of fact, but I had to work to pay my way, and in those days it was extremely difficult to find a job in Athens. People – students would work for a dollar an hour. And so, I went into the Army. I went to – in the U.S. Army for a time. And then as my father had died suddenly, my stepfather died

suddenly. He was – he had started a little furniture store and so I had to spend some time trying to run that business, which I did for a couple of years and paid the debts down and then I got recalled. I was in the Reserves. I got recalled in the U.S. Army in 1961, because of the Berlin Wall crisis. And there was no reason to call up the Reserves, but I've always assumed that President Kennedy and others were sitting around the room wondering, "How can we react to this Berlin Wall going up?" And some bright idea came up, and they said, "Let's call up the Reserves and so I got caught up in that and spent a few weeks there basically."

But in the meantime, I had to dispose of the business and was able to settle up all the debts and get that done and I found myself at loose ends in April of 1962. And I went down to Atlanta, I was – I was intimidated about going into the central city. I had never driven in the city. But I had been to the airport before and so I went to the Atlanta Airport in the old terminal. It was a turquoise building with a barrel roof feature on the front and I took a roll of dimes, to date this now, into the terminal building and made telephone calls from a phone booth, looking for a job. And one of those -- one of those phone calls was to the City of Atlanta. They had a – they were running a help wanted ad in the paper and it was particularly intriguing to me because a man had just gotten elected Mayor, named Ivan Allen. And I had read about him and I had read about – I had been already a follower of the New South movement in Georgia. And living next to North Carolina like I had done growing up, I could see firsthand what progressive political public leadership could bring. North Carolina was a progressive state, its roads were in good shape, its schools were in good shape, and here Georgia was still following demagogues basically. And so this – I had studied enough history to know that I wanted to be identified with the Ivan Allen's of

the world. And, of course, I didn't get to work directly for Mr. Allen when I went to work for the city. The job I got was as a tax clerk, which is the lowest rung on the ladder in the city government.

And I stayed at the tax office for a year and then went to the finance department and spent most of the sixties in the city of Atlanta finance department learning all about the city, and particularly the airport. I was fortunate in one regard in that one of my duties in the finance department was keeping up with government grants. They were a very small thing when I started. But you know that President Johnson -- when he came into office -- started the war on poverty and Mayor Allen was a favorite because he had gone up to testify for the Civil Rights legislation of the sixties. I think the only Mayor -- certainly the only Southern Mayor to do so. And so, the Johnson administration basically flooded the city of Atlanta with federal grants of all kinds. And suddenly here, this young senior accountant up in the finance department was running in budgets about as big as the city general fund budget. And everybody had to come to me to find out if they could spend this money for that purpose or that purpose. And so, at a very young age I came to the attention of city leaders, which was just a fortunate result of the timing that -- of the times. But one of the -- some of the biggest grants that I was dealing with were for the airport, the expansion of the airport. And so, therefore, I got to learn the administration of the airport and later that's where I went to spend most of my later years in the city government is at the airport.

SHORT: Did you work directly with Mayor Allen?

BERRY: I did finally. It was a great ambition of mine and toward the end of his term he hired a young man with a consulting company in Atlanta called Gerald Horton. He hired Mr. Horton to give him a report on how the Mayor's Office should be organized in the modern time. Before that, the Mayor was just basically the Mayor and a secretary and a few other people.

So, Mr. Horton, later State Representative Horton, produced a report and created an organization within the Mayor's Office. You had a Chief Administrative Officer and Deputy Chief Administrative Officer and various other positions that would deal with various aspects of city government. And I was fortunate enough to be chosen as the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer under a man name Dan Sweat who was the Chief Administrative Officer.

And so that happened in the late sixties and it was – Mayor Allen was one of the great natural leaders of our time. He was a perfect gentleman and he had come up in business so he knew how to delegate, he knew how to get things done by using other people and to inspire them and to encourage them and he taught me lessons that I used for the rest of my career in how to get along with people in a public setting and how to deal with the public and he was a magnificent leader.

SHORT: He was Mayor during a very critical time during the Civil Rights Movement.

BERRY: He was indeed. The city was going through drastic change at the time. Dr. King was assassinated during his time at City Hall. There were very – there were very tough moments and

– but he faced them with courage and he had established over his life a pattern of contact with Atlanta’s African-American community. He was trusted by them. They supported his candidacy when he ran in both cases -- the first time and the second time. And so, he – it was easier then and certainly when you consider how Atlanta handled those issues compared to other Southern cities, it certainly set Atlanta apart and it created a image and a reputation that Atlanta is still – still with Atlanta to this very day.

SHORT: Yeah, it enjoys it today.

BERRY: Uh-huh.

SHORT: The political times of Ivan Allen and the airport, I think, are one of the – are two of the major reasons that Atlanta is by far the leading city in the South.

BERRY: That’s absolutely true and much of it goes back to Mayor Allen. I worked for four Mayors and all of them were special and strong people in their own way. But truthfully, most of what Atlanta looks like today and what Atlanta is today can be traced back to Mayor Allen’s Six Points for the Sixties. That was his slogan and it was professional sports and rapid transit and so forth and good race relations. And so, much of what we have today is still his legacy I think.

SHORT: And obviously good relations with the Federal government.

BERRY: Absolutely. We would get calls – it's almost humorous to think back of it now, but we would get calls saying – from an agency head that, "We have a grant here for you. Have an application in by next Friday." And I'm assuming that President Johnson in cabinet meetings would say, "I want a grant in Atlanta, Georgia ASAP." Particularly after Mayor Allen went up and testified for the Public Accommodations Act and the Voting Rights Act. And so, these guys were under pressure to have us a grant. So we would throw an application together and send it up by air mail and pretty soon a check would come and it was an amazing time.

SHORT: The city continued to progress under the – Mayor Sam Massell who succeeded Allen. You were there.

BERRY: Yes, I was. Dan Sweat left to become head of the Atlanta Regional Commission. And Mayor Massell was kind enough to appoint me to that position. So I was a – I was the Chief Administrative Officer under Mayor Massell. He is perhaps the most under estimated and -- of the Mayors that I worked for. He was a very smart individual and he saw the big picture and we would not have – there's no doubt that we would not have MARTA if it had not been for Mayor Massell. And he did things like, for example, when it came time to build an indoor arena for the professional basketball and hockey teams, he said, "No tax payer money." And held to it. And today it's very common for the tax payers all across the country in cities to be subsidizing these

kinds of projects. But he – he would not do it as a matter of principle and did not do it, and the first Omni Arena never cost the tax payers a dime.

SHORT: *Laughter*

BERRY: So, he was a very good Mayor and got caught up, though, in situation not of his doing with respect to the growth of the African-American electorate in Atlanta. They found themselves, due to demographic changes, to be in a majority when it came time for him to run for re-election. And you had this very articulate, very eloquent, very strong, very charismatic young black man, Maynard Jackson, who ran against him and won, convincingly. And this would have been in 1973 – the fall of '73 to take office in '74. And so it work for Maynard and Maynard is the one who appointed me to head the airport – to head the airport.

SHORT: Before we get to the airport, I'd like to take a second to talk about the transition of the City Council from the old Board of Alderman into the City Council and the changes there.

BERRY: Yes. The city was governed by a very odd system, to be honest, up until 1973. We had the Board of Alderman and the departments were actually run by committees of these – of these Alderman. The Major was a weak Mayor form of government, although it's hard to think of Mayor Allen as being a weak major, or Mayor Hartsfield before him. But that's the technical definition of the system we had. Interestingly, the mayor appointed the committees of the Board

of Alderman, so he had an indirect say so, and of course, all the department heads of city government respected the Mayor highly, and so he was not without power, certainly. But that was the rather odd system that we had. In 1973, I think the -- I think the legislation was actually adopted in the General Assembly session of '72 to take effect in '73. Representative Grace Hamilton and others wrote a new charter. They actually formed a Charter Commission who wrote a new charter for the city of Atlanta, which changed the system to a strong Mayor form of government. The Mayor was the Chief Executive Officer of the City, oversaw the department heads on a day-to-day basis and the City Council was supposed to be the legislative branch. They would deal with policy and enact the laws and that's the system that the city still operates under to this very day.

SHORT: And it racially balanced the members as I recall.

BERRY: It did. It began that process. Atlanta was changing in any event and would have -- would have elected a majority black City Council shortly under any rule that you could have come up with. But the -- just like the initial MARTA system and just like all other major issues of the time in Atlanta, there was a racial compromise in getting this done and certainly one of those was the make up of the City Council. We had elected the first African-American council members back in the early sixties when Alderman Q.V. Williamson was the first one. And of course, that process continued.

SHORT: How was the transition from Massell to Mayor Jackson?

BERRY: Well, Mayor Jackson brought a whole new spirit. In watching this interview being taped within just a few weeks of President Obama's inauguration -- and I have thought often in these last few weeks about how the huge expectations and the tremendous outburst of hope and change. And it occurred on a city scale with Mayor Jackson. I have told the anecdote that we used to get the mail at the Mayor's office in City Hall in a box, just a regular postal box that the postman would bring up to the Mayor's office . When Mayor Jackson got elected, we started getting mail in duffle bags -- full -- and there would be hundreds of resumes every week from young people all across the country wanting to -- who had seen him on television or had seen him make a speech at a university, and so it was as much the same as you've seen in recent days with the inauguration of President Obama. It was -- it was an exciting time and Mayor Jackson was perhaps the most charismatic leader that I've ever had the opportunity to be that close to. And to watch him be able to get up and with just natural eloquence change a crowd's mind on some issue -- which he was totally capable of doing. And so, it was quite different in that respect.

SHORT: So Mayor Jackson asked you to go to the airport.

BERRY: Yes, he did.

SHORT: To manage the airport.

BERRY: To manage the airport, and at the time there was a large Capitol campaign – Capitol improvement campaign that was filled with controversy. We were doing a major expansion of the airport. We were building new – proposing to build new runways and the terminal that exists today was to be built out in the middle of the field. We had to buy some 1200 acres of developed land that was full of subdivisions and clear the way for it, and it was a major, major undertaking and as is the case today, almost all of those kinds of things are filled with controversy and people – and they required agreements with the airlines and it was a very difficult financing thing to go through and so forth. And it was bogged down at the time because Mayor Jackson was insisting that no less than 20% of the total contracting expenditures to be made would be made to minority firms. And that was a radically new approach for the city and for even the Federal Aviation Administration and others. And the question was how were we going to do it and get the project done and get it done on time and keep the costs down, which was the airlines' major issue. But we did it and in 1980 the new terminal opened and the final – the final on the four runways was done in 1983. Subsequently, they've added a fifth runway, but this goes back to the New South issue that I mentioned before. The idea of using public policy to encourage economic activity is a part and parcel of Henry Grady's philosophy from the beginning. And it's something that I always knew we could do and it was always possible ,if we just had the right leadership, to bring us along and it was – it was wonderful being a part of a situation where Governor Carl Sanders was the Governor of Georgia and Mayor Allen was Mayor, and then later, Mayor Jackson, who was equally – and Mayor Massell, who were equally interested in the expansion of the airport.

And today, something like 50,000 people work at that airport, but it is the most often mentioned reason why people make an investment in Atlanta and Georgia and it underlies our 200,000 job convention industry and it's just a great example of what Georgia could have done 20 or 30 years before had we had the right kind of leadership.

SHORT: Well Mayor Hartsfield paid a lot of attention to the airport when he was there.

BERRY: Oh, he did. Yeah, he did, but sometimes he was a voice crying in the wilderness about it. I mean he didn't have the widespread support that later came to bear on it.

SHORT: Which begs this question, George; it's often been said that the state should take over the airport. Do you think that's a good idea?

BERRY: Well, I don't think it's financially possible and possibly even legally possible for that to do. The only – I used to advise the mayor – it used to come up quite often at every General Assembly. Representative Guy Hill from Fulton County – had a bill that he would introduce every year and I would tell the mayor and others that I was advising at the time that the only way that will ever happen is if the city of Atlanta fails. If it fails to provide the leadership, if it fails to keep the facility thriving then there is a danger of that happening. But until and unless that happens, I don't see that as a possibility.

SHORT: Your time with the mayors – various mayors, you spent a good big of your time working with the business community; I'd like to say as an ambassador to the business community. What was the relationship between the city and the business community during the transition from white to black?

BERRY: Well, that was a role that I did provide for Mayor Jackson in particular. The business community – I found that business people generally had a rather poor understanding of the political scene and were somewhat intimidated by it. And so, they searched for someone that they could communicate with who seem to understand it and that was sort of the role I played and I would – many times my job was simply to give them bad news and to try to instruct them on what they needed to do to get along in the new world. And some accepted that advice and some did not. But I once told a group of business leaders who were on the wrong side of some particular issue that I knew how to predict who would win the Mayor's race, and that was to go to the Central Atlanta Progress Annual Meeting and go out in the parking lot and read the bumper sticks and bet on the other man.

SHORT: *Laughter*(

BERRY: And that's generally the way I found the business community.

SHORT: Did you get involved in politics very much when you were over there?

BERRY: No, not really at the city government. Now you have to understand politics when you're a professional administrator. You have to know it. You have to understand why this particular official can't vote for your project and why others can, but in the retail type of politics that I think you're referring to, the answer is no. The mayor and city Councilmen you were working for, they insulated you from that.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Well then you became, along the line, the Commissioner of Industry and Trade.

BERRY: Yes.

SHORT: Appointed by Governor Harris.

BERRY: Exactly. A further continuation of the New South Movement was major economic generating facility in the state and then going to the state agency that promoted and encouraged investment, job creation, tourism, trade I felt was a natural step. I felt I was still on the same journey that I had started on many years before and I worked at the Department of Industry Trade and Tourism, as it was then called, for, as you say, the time of the Harris Administration, from about 1983 to 1990. And we were – we had a great number of successes during those years, very great amount of job creation, particularly international companies. This was a time

when international companies found Georgia to be very attractive and one of the great reasons was that we had begun to have direct flights from Atlanta to foreign capitals and that kind of convenience and that kind of awareness that it created resulted in opportunities for us.

SHORT: Governor Busbee had worked on that.

BERRY: Absolutely. He was a great hero to all of us for beginning the movement toward recruiting foreign companies into Georgia and we build on his foundation.

SHORT: How well did you know Joe Frank Harris before]

BERRY: I didn't know him well at all. Had not been a part of his campaign for governor. I knew who he was, of course. He was Chairman of the Appropriations Committee in the House at the time and was well known for people inside state government, but I did not know him well at all and was frankly surprised to get a call from him. And Mayor Andrew Young had come into office at the time and I was still at the airport but we had finished the major project. It was done and the – I was receptive to a new challenge and I had a great relationship with Governor Harris and with Mrs. Harris, who was a vital part of that administration. And I found Governor Harris to be the least ego driven elected official I had ever known. She neither subtly or overtly ever did anything for self aggrandizement or for exercising his own ego. It was always straight up, what's good, what's right we will do, and it's rarely found in political figures where ego is

coin of the realm.

SHORT: *Laughter* You traveled with him a good bit around the world.

BERRY: Yes.

SHORT: Tell us about some of those trips.

BERRY: Well we went to – we would go to Japan and Korea and we could go to Hong Kong and we would go to Europe at least once a year and we – *Laughter* – the first time – I didn't know. I don't know. I traveled some, of course, being at the airport, but I – but not like that. And we would – the first trip I remember we went to Hong Kong, or one of the first trips we went to Hong Kong and scheduled appointments on the day that we arrived, not aware the jet lag and the time difference, and we were both nodding off and going to sleep in the front of prospective business people we were trying to recruit. So we learned to break our trip up maybe stopping in Hawaii if we were going to the Far East. And Governor Harris, of course, did not drink any alcoholic beverage and sometimes in certain situations we would have to alert our host that this was the case and that he was not being – trying to offend when he would refuse a glass of wine in France or Belgium where it was consider normal. And when it came time to give a toast he would do that sometimes or he would ask me to do it. So I use to kid him that I was the designated drinker in the Harris Administration.

Laughter

SHORT: During that time the state opened an office in Europe.

BERRY: Well, actually Governor Busbee opened that office, yeah. A man named Jack Turbyville [ph] and Billy Holbert who did a great job of opening an office and we also opened an office in Korea while I was there, and we had an office in Tokyo. That's where most of our businesses were coming from.

SHORT: George, we hear from time to time criticism about the states offering tax breaks and other incentives to lure industry. Is that a bad idea?

BERRY: Well, it's not a bad idea if other states do it. I don't like it. I never did like it. I had – as a matter of principle, I had problems with doing it. But then, you would have Alabama, or South Carolina, or Tennessee doing it. I once asked Governor Harris if he might talk at the Southern Governors Conference about a mutual commitment not to do it on the theory that if one state did it then others would have to but if no states did it then we would not have to. And he said he got no positive feedback at all from that, because Mississippi and other states said, "Well, Georgia's way ahead of us, so naturally you'd like to stop the world at the present place. But I don't like it, Bob, and I would rather we did not have to do it."

SHORT: George, you decided then to run for Lieutenant Governor. What prompted that decision?

BERRY: *Laughter* Well, I was at the end of my career at industry and trade. I'd been there seven years, Governor Harris was going out of office. I did not know exactly what I wanted to do next, but remember now what my root in life was taking. It was taking this New South, we can do things through leadership and get the state of Georgia not only to take its place in the Southern states but to take its place in the national scene as a major player and elevate our people so that they can live as good a life as anybody can. So, there did not seem to be a consensus at the time on who lieutenant governor ought to be and there was a field – it was – Governor Miller had been there a long time – Lieutenant Governor Miller had been there a long time so there was an empty office, so to speak, and there was a field of about eight people running. So I don't know, I convinced myself that there was a chance for somebody like me to perhaps get into a runoff, and so I made the plunge. I always thought and told my wife that I would always doubt myself if I didn't do it. I'd always wonder if I could have done it and didn't do it, and I didn't want to say when I was sitting on the porch at age 75, which I'm nearing now --

Laughter

BERRY: That back in 1990 I could have reached but I didn't reach, so I did it. It was fun. I

found out that I was not the best candidate in the world. And I missed getting into a runoff. I was in third place out of the eight, which was not shabby but not good enough. So I had to put it down as one of the – one of the interesting experiences I've had in life and gone on from there.

SHORT: So, what was life after public service?

BERRY: Yes, I went to work for a friend of mine – a dear friend of mine, Tom Cousins with the firm of Cousins Properties. I've known him for many years, respected him highly. He's a great visionary. And I had -- let's see -- almost 15 years. I retired at the end of '04 from Cousins Properties. So it was a good 15 years. I worked on many interesting projects. North Point in Alpharetta, Paulding County, various major buildings here in Buckhead and Atlanta, and I have nothing but the highest respect for Tom and for that company. They do things right and they are not included in the reference I made earlier to business people who typically don't know what's going on.

*Laughter

GARNSEY: They do. And they're frankly one of the few business organizations that I thought enough of to work for.

SHORT: Were you involved in the East Lake project?

BERRY: I was. Not directly. I didn't handle a lot, but I helped with some of the governmental issues that surrounded that project.

SHORT: That was a very unusual project. Can you tell us a little about it.

BERRY: Well, it's – Tom Cousins said that he could turn a neighborhood around, a neighborhood that had been given up on by everybody, including people like me when I was with the city of Atlanta. I mean my view was that a neighborhood like that was simply beyond solution. The crime and the social problems that afflicted a community like that was – simply had to be let run its course and then perhaps some day it could be rebuilt. Here was Tom Cousins saying, "No, I believe it can be done and I believe I can use the game of golf of all things to do it." To be honest with you, I thought he was not with it, let's say, and I advised him not to do it. But he did it and he did it successfully which proves that – what a visionary that he is. Now, he put a tremendous amount of private money into it. It was not anything that stood on its own. It was done because of his generosity and – but he restored a historical golf club and he used the membership money that companies paid to join that club, to rebuild the housing around it, and he's created programs for young kids to learn the game of golf. He built a new charter school. He built a new Boys and Girls Club. And then all of the sudden, as usually happens, private individuals have started fixing up and buying and restoring and remodeling private properties -- homes. So, East Lake is on its way to becoming a thriving community, and just

because this one man said, "I can do it, where all others have failed." And he did.

SHORT: It's a well known golf course because of Bobby Jones.

BERRY: Yes, Bobby Jones' family had a home joining the golf course and that's where he learned to play golf. And he represented East Lake in his tournaments that he played as a golfer.

SHORT: Somewhere along the line you were asked by Governor Miller to be involved in the formation of the Olympics, particularly from the financial standpoint.

BERRY: Hmm-mm. The state created an authority called the Metropolitan Atlanta Olympic Games Authority. And Governor Miller talked to me about it and I initially declined and he appointed a very fine man, Harvey Mathis, Atlanta real estate executive, well known, well respected, and tragically, within just a few weeks, Mr. Mathis died suddenly.

And so, I talked to Governor Miller again about it and I said, "Okay, I know this needs to be filled and I will do it." And I was then with Cousins and Cousins people approved me doing it, and it basically was the governmental oversight of the Olympic Games in Atlanta. And it was done to insure that, for example, things like the power of eminent domain, which had to be used to assemble the real estate for the Olympic Stadium and for other reasons why governmental powers were required and that's what we did. I found it to be – I was not a big fan of the Olympics. So therefore, it was somewhat of a strange choice, I think, to head this organization,

but I found that my financial background in governmental projects was important and I found that the people involved in the Olympic Organizing Committee had drunk the Kool-Aid, so to speak.

SHORT: *Laughter*

BERRY: They were emotionally, psychologically involved. They would say with absolute sincerity, "This is the greatest peace time event in the history of mankind." And they would believe it! And I would look at them thinking that they were going to suddenly break out laughing, but they didn't laugh!

SHORT: *Laughter*

BERRY: They were totally serious. And so I got off to a rocky start with Mr. Payne – Billy Payne, who was the father of the Olympics and the guiding force behind it. But I think over time that working with people like A.D. Frazier and others that we – I did not want to become an obstacle. I just wanted to try to inject a slight amount of reality into the process, and in so doing I – it's one of those things where if you're not with us a thousand percent you're against us type attitude.

SHORT: Hmm-mm.

BERRY: And I'm not sure I overcame it totally but we had a cordial -- finally. And I must say -- and I wrote a piece for -- that was published in the Atlanta papers at the end of the process when the final commitment was done -- the final commitment being the conversion of the Olympic Stadium into the Braves Stadium -- that I gave them total credit. They did everything they said they would do. They made good on every financial commitment -- the Olympics did. And Billy Payne and A.D. Frazier and Andrew Young and Robert Holder and the other people involved in the Atlanta Olympic Committee all deserve credit for that.

SHORT: So then, tax payers paid no money in the Olympics?

BERRY: That's correct.

SHORT: Well, that's good. Well, George, let's talk about Georgia today. 2009, are we headed in the right direction?

BERRY: Well, it seems to me that the state has -- is suffering from what many of our governments do, including our national government, in that we have put off dealing with several major life-changing decisions because they're difficult. Because we today seem to want consensus rather than making hard choices and suffering from the controversy that those decisions result.

I speak -- one thing that's particularly on my mind is transportation. That's a -- it's our steel if we were Pittsburgh, it's our gambling if we were Las Vegas -- transportation is what makes our state go and certainly what makes the Atlanta region go. It's been ignored now for several years and unless we do something about it, it seems to me that we're condemning ourselves to mediocrity, which we have spent 50 years trying to get out of. I think we have serious tax reform issues. I think our tax system needs a complete overhaul, but special interests, the fear of controversy, the desire for consensus, all the other issues that seem to control us these days seem to be interfering with that. So I think though -- I think this coming election in 2010 -- elections -- represent a turning point. I think that if we don't make some bold moves -- I think if we don't elect someone capable of making bold moves that the state is going to suffer economically. And of course, coming out of this current recession or downturn or whatever you wish to call it, there seems to be sort of a loss of confidence that I have not seen in my years and I'm a little bit -- still a little bit too young for the Great Depression but from what I read about it, it's some of the same kinds of fears are intruding on us. So, I see a lot of challenges for our state in the years ahead. But most of the problems that I see are caused by the failure to simply deal with it -- suck it up and deal with it.

And incidentally, a criticism that applies much more to our Federal government. And the great hope with this new President is does he really have the courage to deal with the Social Security Entitlement Programs and Medicaid and Medicare and healthcare? Is he going to say, "U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives, just because you got a bunch of lobbyists yelling over here or just because you've got some big town meetings that are going to be anti what you've --

what we've got to do, or are you going to cave in on me or are we going to get this done. And I'm watching that very closely.

SHORT: What sort of financial help do cities in Georgia receive from the state government?

BERRY: Well, very little directly from the state government. It's always been a big question, a big issue. You know, Atlanta and the Atlanta region finance a lot of improvements outside the Atlanta region. In other words, the taxes collected. And nobody's ever made a big issue of that because the taxes we pay are state taxes and if the taxes that are collected from Atlanta tax payers go to build a new combined high school in Randolph, Clay County, Georgia and deep southwest Georgia that's simply the way the system works. And it would be almost impossible to figure out exactly where taxes come from and where they go and nobody's interested in doing that. But there are issues -- for example, with Grady Hospital we found out years ago that people were -- in other counties in Georgia were sending their AIDs patients and other chronic illness patients up to Atlanta and all they had to do was create an address -- create a local address -- and you then are accepted at Grady Hospital. And there's no telling how much money that the tax payers have -- Fulton and DeKalb County have spent on treating chronically ill people from all over Georgia. To me this is one of the greatest failings of state in not belying up to that responsibility.

SHORT: Are we any further down the road toward that New South that you wished for as a

youngster?

BERRY: Absolutely we are. In taking – if you go back – if you go back to 1948 when Herman Talmadge came to Blairsville, Georgia and backed his truck up to the Courthouse Square and harangued us for an hour saying that our greatest challenge is maintaining our way of life. When you looked around and our way of life was poverty and ignorance and malnutrition, and if you looked at that scene around that courthouse that day with faded overalls and mules hitched to wagons and compare it to today, you would say you were not living in the same world.

We've made tremendous progress. We have moved the average per capita income in Georgia from 57% of the national average in the year I was born to over 90% today of the national average. How much more medical care can be afforded? How much more education can be bought and paid for? How much more enrichment have lives seen as a result of this change? I want to close that number to a 100%. That's what I want to live to see. I want to – whoever is Governor on that day when that number comes out that we have now achieved 100% of the national average per capita income, I want that Governor to declare a state holiday, because that is something that generations of Georgians have fought for. And I just hope and pray that I live that long.

SHORT: And you attribute that to political leadership?

BERRY: I do. There are a hundred other reasons of course, but I'm saying that it didn't happen

until Baker vs. Carr decided that the County Unit System was overthrown and we were able to elect a Carl Sanders as a Governor and we could finally say good-bye to the demagogues, for the most part. And they no longer control our state and our Boards of Educations and our Board of Regents and other institutions of our state. And they've led the way. That's caused the businessman in Indiana to say Georgia, Atlanta, a good place to put my other office or the next plant. And that's what's underline – under lays our progress over these last four decades. And so, I think Henry Grady would be a very proud man if he saw that we finally caught on to what he was saying. That we finally caught on, after all this time, that what he spoke to the New England Society in New York in 1886 that we could raise a brave and beautiful city if we tried. And that we could – and that Jimmy Carmichael spoke about in 1946, that given all of our gifts, then why weren't we number one, not only in the South but in the country as a whole. And it could be done and we've proven in these 40 something years that we can do it. We can't allow it to fail at this point.

SHORT: You had a wonderful career; you've been a great public servant and a great Georgian.

BERRY: You're very kind; I appreciate that.

SHORT: In looking back over that, what do you feel has been your greatest accomplishment?

BERRY: Well, you know, if this is going to be read or looked at by anybody in the future I'd

certainly want to say my wife and children or I would be in serious trouble. *Laughter* Going again to the big picture, and as corny as it sounds perhaps, that through my efforts in helping people like Mayor Allen and in helping people like Governor Harris and – being a part of the economic revolution that’s occurred in our state. The fact that I’ve just been able to add the smallest iota to that is the pride I take in the career I’ve had. I’ve not been a major player – I have – I certainly don’t take any credit that belongs to – mainly to those kinds of people. But I was there for the most part in this period of time and added a shovelful or two, and that’s what I take most pride in.

SHORT: George Berry, on behalf of Young Harris College, the Richard Russell Library, the University of Georgia, and myself, I’d like to thank you for being with us.

BERRY: Thank you, Bob. I enjoyed it.

[END]

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