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Chuck Clay

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BOB SHORT: This is Bob Short, Reflections on Georgia Politics, sponsored by the library at Young Harris College and the Richard B. Russell Library for Research and Studies at the University of Georgia. Our guest today is Chuck Clay, Cobb County Commissioner, State

Senator and Chairman of the Georgia Republican Party. Welcome, Chuck.

CHUCK CLAY: Ah, great to be here. It's always a pleasure.

SHORT: Chuck, with your permission, we'd like to divide our conversation today into three parts. First, your family and your early life. Secondly, your career as a public servant. And lastly, your role in the growth of the Republican Party in Georgia.

CLAY: Watch out.

SHORT: So with your permission let's start talking about the Clay family.

CLAY: It's going to grow grander by the minute. I can assure you. I can assure you. It's funny, and I'll backtrack a little bit. I grew up in a military family which means, and we're sitting here at my law office in Marietta, Georgia, right now, but I grew up moving around and did not come here until I left the University of Georgia Law School in 1978.

However, for a vagabond that I was, coming here was fascinating because I suddenly walked in and there was this big bronze statue on the Square here in Marietta with A.S. Clay on it. You went down Clay Road. There's Clay plazas, Clay schools, Clay, Clay, Clay, and it was - - you're not owed anything for that, but it was a wonderful sort of sense of coming home, if you will, for a guy who never lived more than two or three years anywhere in my life, to be in

Marietta where there was this sense of sudden belonging. Now some of it was very impressive. Some of it might have been more nefarious, but that's probably true of any family and it makes for good reading and even better stories over time.

But then to build on that, the Clays though were one of the early pioneer families here in Cobb County. Came here in about 1850. Came up from the South Georgia area. Had originally come in in Virginia. Part went to Kentucky that wound up being the Henry Clay side of the family.

The horse thieves and bootleggers came south down around Milledgeville, and one of the older sons back then with a division of land, if you didn't get the land, you were kind of out of luck.

And so like a lot of small landless working farmers, they came to places like Cobb County to settle, and it was a hard scramble, you know, independent William Clay in 1850 and settled down here. He was a pretty tough guy. Somebody once told me he whipped a - - was still fist fighting well into his 90's if somebody said anything bad about any of his kids.

But then certainly others that were involved, uneducated, scramble, hard scramble farmer. One of his sons by the name of Alexander Stevens Clay, certainly named after one of the great figures in Georgia history, was one of the younger. He got a minimum of education. Was a 10 year old about the time that Sherman came marching through, and interestingly everybody -- history becomes one sided, but William Clay was an antisessionist [ph]. He refused to serve in the Confederate Army, thought the whole thing was absurd and for rich folks that really wasn't his fight until the fight came to Marietta, and he did like everybody at that point in time, enlist in the home guard. The young boys were carrying water and firewood up. The older guys were digging trenches or helping to supply or fight if you had to.

And of course the town was utterly destroyed. Senator Clay, my grandfather, remembers his father once or twice mentioning had not Union troops fed him in 1865 they would have starved to death. This place was utterly devastated.

And secondly, as he began his career both in law and politics, and while he died at a fairly young age, my grandfather said I never once heard my grandfather mention the confederacy, say the word confederacy. And it wasn't because he was bitter or angry at it. It was the imprimatur of the tragedy, if you will, I sometimes want to contrast that some of my friends and some of the flagger movements and that type of thing now, which I respect certainly the historical side of the SCV and those that would be interested, I find it interesting that those who lived through the hell and the horror, like most folks who do, want to get on with their lives and not look back but look forward.

He became a lawyer here and later was elected to the U.S. Senate. Actually one of the three people in Georgia history served as Speaker of the House, President of the Senate and then became of United States Senator. His portrait's down there at one of the large portraits down at the State Capitol in Atlanta. I've often thought how I could sneak it out at night if I could just build a room big enough to put it.

But an interesting guy. Was the first person to introduce a bill for women's suffrage. Absolutely adamantly opposed the Spanish-American war and the annexation of Hawaii, but was very close friends with Teddy Roosevelt on domestic policy, the trust busting, the progressive side, if you will, of the republican movement, and often was a coauthor of his legislation on the floor of the U.S. Senate when they wanted democrats signatories. He was one of them, and I had a couple of

old timers tell me he may have been a national figure on a national ticket as maybe one of the first southerners as a VP. Collapsed on the floor of the United States Senate of ulcers and literally bled to death internally and died when he was 56 years old. My granddad spent a year or two as a page in the Senate, but died as a relatively young man on something ironically today we can cure with a pill.

He had five kids. Four sons - - six kids. Five sons and a daughter, and almost sort of Faulkner-esque family in terms of accomplishments and tragedy and living life too large too early, but very, very interesting and don't have time to go through necessarily the Lex Clays, the Herbert Clays, the Robin Clays, Frank Clays, his sister, but my grandfather, the youngest of all these boys, one of the older brothers was one of those implicated as one of the ringleaders in the infamous Leo Frank lynching. He was the Solicitor General of the Blue Ridge Circuit at that point in place in time. Lex Clay was supposed to be the most brilliant lawyer and he got a little bit caught up in a life of dissipation. Herbert was the youngest President of the Georgia Senate; died in his 40's from again probably living a little too large.

As I once said, the President of the University wrote to Senator Clay about whether or not he should let Herbert go to a football game because he had been partying a little too hard and not attending to his studies. Maybe things haven't changed all that much in some respects at the university, other than I bet the President doesn't have time to write dads about recounts of your children anymore.

But the youngest, my grandfather, Luscious Clay, went to West Point, graduated from Marietta High School, wanted to go to Georgia Tech but he was too young, so he went back, lied about

his age and got into West Point. Graduated right at the end. It was a three-year class because of World War I and was sent to Europe, did not get into the combat side of things. Got over there at the very end with the need for the combat engineers, as you might expect, toured Europe. But went on to have a sort of a fascinating career.

His life was to me of great interest because it spanned literally World War I through almost the '70s to the cold war negotiations over Berlin and places like that. And again not necessarily time to do so was worked in the CCC. It was very interesting. He got assigned to a project in Dennison, Texas, the Red River Dam, that happened to be Sam Rayburn's district out there, and became very, very good friends over that period of time.

One of the interesting aspects, he headed up the crash airport development program that built 600 something airports in the prelude to the second World War, one of those being here in Marietta, Georgia, that was called Rickenbacker Field. It was going to be the second airport that we've talked about ever since, but Rickenbacker Field was placed here as a preparation to military needs.

When the war broke out, he certainly like any officer at this time and place wanted to combat command, but was assigned to Washington, D.C. where he spent most of the war in charge of supply and material, every tank, rifle, plane, sock, piece of underwear was produced out of their office with about six folks. Another sort of prominent southerner got involved in that was a guy named Jimmy Burns who later went on to be a very, very dear friend. In fact, my granddad gave his eulogy at South Carolina when he died. But helped in building what anybody today would say was the most miraculous overwhelming power of the United States to produce the quantities

of both men, women too, and material. So while it's not something he wanted to do, I think the success speaks for itself.

Was briefly brought into Normandy. Dwight Eisenhower was a good friend going back to the sort of the pre-war '20s and '30s, had both worked on the McCarther staff in the Philippines which would be another story for another time. Went to Normandy where the beaches had been clogged and they couple get supplies out.

And I always remember, and I've tried to remember this in business and politics, is that "I arrived and I could figure out very quickly he had a perfectly good harbor master and nobody would let the poor SOB do his job. So my orders are very simple. You're in charge. Nobody else is to talk to you, and you're not going to hear from me, and in 48 hours if things aren't moving, you're going to be fired." So yes, sir. And he said he had it running marvelously. So sometimes it's empowering the right people to do their job and then leaving them alone and let them do it. And, you know, nothing profound, but a pretty good philosophy.

But he then went on to be interested. He was asked by Roosevelt at the end of the war of 1945 brought into his office and I think little footnote, my granddad was possibly the last person in D.C. to see Roosevelt alive. He left after that meeting, went down - - as an official appointment - - went down to Warm Springs and died a day or two later, and he said "you're going to be the military governor of Germany," and he said "yes, sir." And walked out the door and said to Joe Marshall "by the way what is a military governor of Germany," which is how much preparation folks were given. You know, Roosevelt liked to keep things secretive.

There had been discussions with the Soviets, the French, what was going to be, but the fact of the

matter is you arrived in an utterly destroyed country with horrible human beings that needed to be punished, millions of innocents that needed to be repatriated and treated and gotten back to whatever family or home they could get to, and then somehow instill democracy with a pro-western government with an institutions that mirror our own.

And the fabulous thing about it is they did. It's probably one of the greatest not just American and not just generals, but privates and sergeants and civil folks, civil servants, French, Brits, under some pretty remarkable circumstances punished bad guys not perfectly, but certainly better than anybody else out there. Set up a federal system like ours, and got underway the trappings of a government that was responsive to its people with a free press and free education, while right across the border the Soviets were doing just the opposite and of course that cumulated in '48 with the Berlin airlift. General Clay started that. Certainly General Tunner and the air crews that supplied a plane landing and taking off every 30 to 45 seconds unloading coal on the backs of former German wehrmacht soldiers and officers and civilians and women and children, flour, food and everything you needed to supply a city of two million for a year that nobody said could be done, and again one of the great efforts of doing the right thing for the right reasons to save lives without killing each other.

As I was at a ceremony not too long ago, one of the veterans Gale Halverson, who started the candy drives for the kids, asked one of his pilots "how does it feel to be feeding the very people that you were killing as a bomber pilot, you know, four years ago." He said "it feels a whole lot better feeding them than killing them." And I think that says a lot about the ingenuity of.

He left that, went on to have a marvelous career and was Chairman and CEO of Continental Can.

Built it in the largest diversified packaging firm. Was also became active. He was Eisenhower's campaign manager, along with Herbert Brownell. Was General Clay was a secret conduit to Eisenhower over Europe. Finally got him to run by saying that - - to announce by saying if you don't I think McArthur just might. And that got Ike in the next day. That says a bunch - - probably says all that needs to be said.

But was a great admirer of Eisenhower's and when Eisenhower developed the Eisenhower highway system that was so much integral to development in this part of the world, General Clay headed the commission that put the design together to get that done. He later became the Finance Chair of the RNC, was very much an Eisenhower democrat - - I mean republican for all that that might - - for a guy that grew up as a democrat was an Eisenhower republican for all that might mean in modern day politics.

He was a pragmatist, but he also served when the wall went up. John Kennedy sent him back over to Berlin for a year as his personal envoy with the rank of Ambassador. Spent the - - with the great confrontation of tanks at checkpoint Charlie. That was under his guise and watch to prove that this was in fact a Russian, not a German operation.

And the Kennedys sort of liked him. He was a kind of a take charge, can-do, not a tattle tail kind of guy, and so, you know, some criticized him for serving a democrat President, but again as he said one time over dinner, "I let all you folks say the President - - tell the President no, but there's only two words that come out of my mouth if a President of the United States calls and that's yes sir. So I'll let the politicians worry about whether it's right or wrong. I'm honored to be asked, and if I can help I'm there."

He was a walking history book. He could tell you what it was like to sit across the table of Joseph Stalin at the Moscow meetings after the war, drank a brandy with Winston Churchill or as he was asked to do after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, he was called by Robert Kennedy on December 23rd to come to the White House and would he sign a note and raise some money to save - - to repatriate some of the prisoners captured that Castro indicated he would. He signed a personal note for a couple or million dollars he didn't have right then. They got the Cubans out and sat in Robert Kennedy's office and raised money to pay the note off before Christmas. And small things that folks would never know and not going to be in a history book, but had that window for six almost decades.

My father had two sons. My father and uncle, on the other, both graduated from West Point in 1942. My dad went to the Army Air Corp; my uncle went into the Armor.

SHORT: And these were sons of General Luscious Clay.

CLAY: Yes.

SHORT: Senior.

CLAY: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

SHORT: And your dad was Luscious Clay - -

CLAY: Junior.

SHORT: Junior. Right.

CLAY: My uncle was Frank Clay and both went on - - my dad was a medium bomber pilot out of England and Belgium and France, and Frank landed with troops in North Africa in the Armor and fought to the final days of the war in northern Italy in 1945 and my dad, and I'll focus on that. Frank was a highly, highly decorated two silver stars, two bronze stars. Certainly my dad had his share, but my dad was that cusp of the new force, the Air Force, and he went in as a Second Lieutenant in 1942. By 1945 a lot of them were Lieutenant Colonels if you lived and survived.

And he became a part of that burgeoning and exploding new wing that in 1949 was split off to be United States Air Force, and went on to serve in many capacities from, you know, director of plans at the Pentagon to 7th Air Force Commander in Vietnam, the Commander of NORAD, the Commander in Chief Pacific Air Forces, and as I said before, probably the seminal things that occur in your life, in anyone's life.

But I grew up - - I was born in Tampa. Then we moved to Alabama. Went to Virginia. Moved to Puerto Rico. Moved to Nebraska. Moved back to Virginia, out to Texas, back to Virginia again, out to Hawaii, out to Thailand, back to Hawaii, Colorado, North Carolina and here down in Georgia. So when I say I landed at a place where it was fun to see the name around I meant

that sincerely. But I wouldn't trade. You grow up learning a lot. You make friends quickly. You learn to communicate quickly. You learn some great lessons about life which is never be really friends with the first person that talks to you on a new base because they don't have any friends or they wouldn't be talking to you.

But it is a wonderful way to learn to communicate, deal with other people, you know, from sergeants and NCO's to high ranking officers, the kids played together, went to school together. There might be an officers' club or an NCO club, but it was not an air of superiority. It was just a difference in the role and it was a wonderful place in many respects as a child to grow up in the serenity and safety of a military post where there's that shared mission, shared idealism, passion. At 5:00 when retreat sounds everybody stops their cars, you stop what you're doing, you stand in respectful attention as the flag comes down. It's a very - - you understand the rules and it's important I think for kids, anybody, but particularly kids. You knew where you were on a post like that and it was a wonderful way to grow.

SHORT: As a member of such a distinguished military family, did you ever consider following in their footsteps?

CLAY: Absolutely, and it - - never regrets. If I had not taken the path I did, I certainly thought about it very, very much because there's a part of me that truly loves, as I said, that sense of commitment and mission and shared passion of service. My math was atrocious. I was both concerned about my ability to say go and graduate from West Point, which is still at heart an

engineering mathematics school. Part of it probably was after two generations. I think my dad and granddad may be the only two father/son four-star graduates from West Point.

I think sometimes you may feel like you're competing more against your own family than you are for your own career, and I'm not the first or last to ever feel or express that, so I think a combination of things just made me feel that, you know, there had been law in the family. I - - maybe this is indicative. I enjoy the discourse. I enjoy the give and take. I enjoy that idea of developing a theme and then trying to convince folks that your view and mission is right, but is there a part of me that always gets a lump in my throat when I go to a military retreat or see the flag coming up or down in the morning, absolutely. It will give me goose bumps until the day I die.

SHORT: You chose law.

CLAY: Law chose me.

SHORT: Law chose you.

CLAY: No, I don't mean that because I was that good. Law has - - I mean life has a strange way of sort of eliminating that which you can't do before you arrive at that which you can do. I graduated undergraduate at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. I'm proud to say I was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate at a time in place where I know there were folks smarter than me, but

I am proud to say that at least when I had to didn't cut class much and I studied when I had to mostly, and it paid off and I was very proud and I worked - - I ran a restaurant there really for a couple of years after I got out of school, and but I wanted - - obviously I knew at some point in time and growing up in a military family it's all I knew.

I knew we had lawyers in our family. I have lawyers relatives of my granddad's family in Atlanta, very distinguished lawyers. So I thought "let me give it a try," and as much as anything even then in the '70s Atlanta was kind of a hub. It looked like a better place for opportunity for a young lawyer, so I applied at the University of Georgia.

And I - - my one story, I was at a restaurant running it. I lived out in the country at a farm I just didn't have a phone, so it's lucky they caught me at the restaurant. And said "this is the admissions office at the University of Georgia, do you want to go to law school?" Of course my smart, you know, response would have been "what the hell do you think I put the application in for?" you know. But of course my response was "absolutely I'd be delighted, yes, sir, and when do I need to be there?" "Monday morning."

So on Friday I sold everything I owned, which wasn't much back in 1972 or 3, and a buddy of mine put me in a pickup truck and dropped me what was then a gas station right down from the arches on Atlanta Highway coming into town. I remember going to the gas station attendant and saying "can you tell me where the University of Georgia is?" looking like an absolute moron.

"Yeah about the next 2,000 acres." "Thank you, sir."

And started law school 24 hours after closing - - 48 hours after closing my kitchen down I was a right eager enthusiastic youngster at law school. Law school is a little bit of enigmatic

experience I might put it that way. It was not - - I think they probably do better now, but it was a little bit of a mysterious process and I've never quite understood a Socratic system which is "I'm paying you perfectly good money for your experience, why are you asking me the questions to the stupid, you know, answer your stupid questions. That's what I'm paying you for." But did get through. It is a grind. Proud to get through.

And then what happened with me is fortuitously sometimes luck, fate, the Almighty good or bad, I knew I didn't want to work in a big downtown firm. I knew I didn't want to. That was not me. And I went to - - and I needed a job and I went to the job posted board and there was a little job that said Solicitor's Office, Marietta, Georgia, Assistant Solicitor open. And I got in my little pickup truck and drove over here and interviewed me, Herb Rivers, and hired me that day. So it was a win-win. I needed a paycheck. He needed an Assistant Solicitor. But it's the greatest thing that happened to me in terms of my legal career because suddenly things came in focus. It forced me to get into courtrooms and develop a style, develop a passion, develop communication, those types of skills, and it comes in myriads of different ways and modes, but it was a great place.

The Solicitor tries misdemeanor cases and you could go in and try one after another after another, and then I moved over to the D.A.'s office. Tom Charron had just been elected; was the first republican District Attorney in the State of Georgia. In 1980 he was up for reelection. We won a landslide election when the - - fortunately when the absentee votes were counted at 6:00 in the morning, but I spent four wonderful years over there, and that's probably what really got me focused and looking more at the republican side and then sort of igniting kind of that interest in

local government and politics.

I left the D.A.'s office for a year or so. One of the commissioners had decided to not run for reelection, a democrat and a fine person, and I announced for that position as a republican which still in West Cobb in 19 - - even this was 1986 at this point in time, was still sort of unheard of in West Cobb, but it didn't take too much to see that the growing numbers if you could tap into them were from out of state, they were moving in, new neighborhoods and they were probably going to vote republican just because they didn't like what they saw - - they thought they didn't like what they saw of the "good old boy" system.

Unfortunately as again plans always work, the same individual who decided not to run again then changed his mind and decided to run again, and what became I thought would be a run for an open seat became a very contested and occasionally bitterly contested run that I wound up upset - - unseating - - upsetting if you will because I think everybody at that point in time didn't think a republican could win out there. It was no brilliance of mine we found some common themes of neighborhood protection, you know, managed zoning, it was that beginning of the clash of growth versus antigrowth, and we were able to tap into it.

But I look at it not because of anything I did, as one of the first truly modern campaigns. The RNC through Reagan and Go Pac had spent an enormous amount of money focusing on voter ID and getting these people into programs and identified individually, and then working those individuals to go vote on a consistent theme and message, and it made me a believer that organization and skill and the money needed to do it mostly which was provided by the RNC, not to me specifically, but to republicans everywhere. Cobb had suddenly burst on the scene as a

republican county, and they were investing in it and I was an early beneficiary.

Back up just one sentence, you know, when I say it was still a democrat area and why folks vote republican, you know, when I got here like any young sort of idealistic person, I'd go to the two different party meetings and it was then the democrats that in my mind were the more closed minded, that were, you know, talking always about them Yankees and Yankees and off color things and seemed closed and old. Probably younger than I am now, but at the time and place it seemed old, whereas the republicans, the Johnny Isaksons, the Johnny Greshams, the Warren Herrons, you know, Babe Atkins and Bill Atkins and any number of others, Bob Barr back then, they were young, they were enthusiastic, they were out there bringing people in, and if you looked at one versus this and you were a young person, it was the republicans that looked like the progressives - - not looked like, at the time were.

And so I got involved with that and then - - and we sort of hit that cusp of things really breaking county wide in terms of republican strength here. It's ebbing back the other way now, but certainly that was a beginning and, you know, I probably ascribe more to the Bob Dole theory of republicanism than most anything else which is when Bob Dole came back from the war and wanted to run he went down to the then voting office and counted how many registered republicans there were and how many registered democrats there were, saw there were three times as many republicans and said "you know I think I'm a republican." We don't register by party here, but it was clear to me that the numbers were moving in that direction and for all the right reasons.

You know, two years after that Carl Harrison, a very dear friend and long time public servant,

had had a heart transplant and went back to work, maybe worked too hard, he did what he loved to do, died in a Senate seat. 37 came open halfway through my first term as a county commissioner. I was elected in '86. Helped institute the first code of ethics for the commission. And you know the thing I'm most proud of as a commissioner? We were having one or two deaths a year in Cobb, about six deaths a year in the metro area, from these trench cave-ins, construction sites, and we implemented the first mandatory licensing program and training program to ensure that when you - - trenches were dug they were either boxed or sured up in a way, and we have not had a fatality in Cobb County in that kind of accident since then. Simple safety precautions that never glamorous, but that's what commissioners do and it saved lives. Went down to the Senate, was lucky enough to get elected in '88.

SHORT: One of 11.

CLAY: One of 11. The proud 11. Paul Coverdell was our fearless leader and a fine one, but we had some wonderful from Skin Edge and Sallie Newbill, and gosh, Jim Tysinger and Joe Burton and Frank Albert and Ted Land. I'll leave some good ones out, you know, but it was a good group of people that were both deep and profound like a Jim Tysinger. There were up and comers like Skin Edge or Sallie, Paul Coverdell was indefatigable and was both a proud republican, but knew how to work with leadership. Roy Barnes being one of his closest friends until he died, and those things paid benefits.

And what I learned to do as a republican in the minority, if you're going to be effective you do

have to learn how to legislate one on the margins. You're not going to be on the conference committee for the budget, but it doesn't mean there aren't effective things that you can do. And the second one is you build relationships and coalitions that stand the test of time because I used to go out and find folks in the house, rural farm belt that I didn't know much about, that I would find some way to befriend because I knew they could vote for me with probably no sweat and I could vote for them on some other things with no sweat, and you've made yourself a friend for not on every issue, but a lot of times when you really need a vote of importance, and you learn how to do those things and it's a dying art. It's one thing I think that I don't see as much now is the ability just to intuitively understand that your political enemy today may be your most important vote the next day, and you don't give a hoot party or where they're from or anything else. You got to always keep that door open. And I enjoyed it. I learned a lot.

They were the giants down there. I mean Zell was still - - Joe Frank was Governor. The famous last minute tax on food with all the vegetables misspelled. Zell went on to be elected Governor and of course the lottery was his big signal statement at that time and place, but I had the great joy of watching Culver Kidd just hand out mirrors before a speech one day and get to that crescendo "there's only one thing standing between you and doing the right thing. Now pick up your mirrors and take a look."

As I said before he didn't give a hoot, and, you know, I learned later he'd cry and he'd thunder, but he was a genius at bringing in stacks of bills and he'd have these emotional ones that you thought he was just going to expire over. He didn't care. He'd get the little bills passed that created another six jobs in Baldwin County and Milledgeville every year that he was there.

Wonderful man. Wonderful guy.

SHORT: That's why they called him the Silver Fox.

CLAY: He got it. He got it. I'm telling you. You know, Tom Murphy was ruling supreme in the House, but good things happened for Georgia. There was a lot of profound leadership and I'm always respectful - - I was a proud republican. I went on later and got to be elected minority leader, but I was always proud of all those who served, much like the camaraderie in the military, and I see some of that camaraderie fraying today and it disappoints me because, you know, Zell Miller, as you well know, he could file a republican about as well as anybody I've ever heard back in the, I guess '90s, but it was always with just - - it was the theater and you knew it was theater. But when it came to getting something done, you know, Zell Miller would sit down "what do I need? What do you need to get your - - what do I need? What do you need, what do I need to get this vote? Let's get it done." The lottery being probably the best example of that, but I have enormous respect for the Zell Millers and the Tom Murhyps. I had never served in the House, but I know the quality and the passion he brought to that position and the benefit that accrued to Georgia by having that. No one party, no one individual's got a monopoly on what's right or what's smart.

SHORT: Let me ask you this question.

CLAY: Yeah.

SHORT: It occurred to me that since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson said to Richard Russell, our Senator at the time, "I'm turning the south over to the republicans", it took all those years between 1964 and 2002 to elect a republican governor.

Why?

CLAY: You know I first describe that quite candidly -- the quality of leadership. I mean there's some daggone good leadership in this state over that period of time. Again, you know, probably the high water mark for the potential of that was Bo Callaway back in '64. And fell short - - well went to the General Assembly, and then elected Lester Maddox after Bo had won a plurality but not a majority, and Lester Maddox became Governor and the republican tide if you will receded from that point until the 2000.

There's also the difficulty the business community is not as diverse. I mean the big dollar contributing business community is focused in one area, and as long as the democrats were in control they were better funded, they were much better funded. Republicans could peck away at the edges, but mounting a statewide campaign without the financial resources to do was also dauntingly difficult during those years. Unless you had the Atlanta political business base economic base sort of behind you, they stayed with the dems for most of this period of time. And it really wasn't until for good/bad reasons decades later that the house of cards politically if you will collapsed with on Governor Barnes whether that's his fault or not or it was coming

inevitable. There's probably a certain inevitability to that, but we all thought it would have occurred a whole lot earlier. Sort of like next year in Jerusalem the old famous, you know, saying we're republicans, you know, next year in Atlanta, next year on West Paces Ferry, next year in the Governor's Office and it seemed to go, go, go, and go. But, you know, now republicans are strong in control, but the dems are swinging back nibbling on the edges. They're moving back into the Cobbs and the Gwinnetts, certainly the Dekalbs where you're seeing a growing democrat base. Roy Barnes could be reelected Governor. If not, I do think - - if it's not him I think a republican could win - - will win this time, but don't ever write out the other side in politics.

SHORT: Right.

CLAY: The pendulum always swings. I don't think we'll be in control for 130 years. I wish - - that may be good or bad. I don't think it will be that long.

SHORT: Let me ask you this question. It seems that the Georgia electorate thinks that to be republican you're conservative and to be democrat you're a liberal. That's not necessarily true is it?

CLAY: Certainly never been true in the south. I don't want to speak for New York or Pennsylvania, but obviously, you know, there was no more economic fiscal conservative

anywhere in the world than a southern democrat. Republicans rose the tide in some respects on making government more open and doing certain things better, but the fact of the matter is in some respects the republicans were seen as the more “liberal” and I use that by today’s standards in the ‘70’s than were the dems.

Ultimately the national realignment did sort of move into the south and you saw white voters drifting to the republican party, African American, minority and fewer sort of urban metro liberals being the base of the democratic party, and truthfully that’s not good. I think the American political spectrum has been with political parties that represented if not a complete spectrum of conservative to liberal, but a broader tint because it forced you to govern and compromise in the middle. I do fear that we have a rigid sort of almost an English parliamentary system where you’ve got, you know, Labour versus, you know, Tory versus Labour. I hope we don’t go that way, but you are seeing a polarization now that I hope in time we see sort of merging back with groups of both crossing lines.

SHORT: A few years ago the Republican Party seemed to be confined mostly to what was known as the donut, which is suburban Atlanta, but it has now expanded throughout the state. Is that a result of the efforts of the state party?

CLAY: I’m going to give a lot of that - - in terms of the outcome, I’m going to give a lot of credit to that to Guy Milner when he made that first run. He was the first republican who truly won almost every rural traditionally democrat county where there was a - - I hate - - I don’t mean

these words in any mean way, but a white majority he pulled those all into the republican camp. Now groundwork being laid, party structure is important. I can remember going - - I used to laugh and say "you go to some parts of Georgia back when I was chairman and certainly before that to have a republican party meeting, the only people who are republicans in south Georgia in the '70s and '80s were the folks who couldn't get in the Kiwanis Club." So, you know, you really build - - you're building interesting characters to say the least.

But the party is a network that allows a framework to be taken and a model from community to community, from county to county where you have some ability to plug faces where there may not be any elected officials. So you get good people that represent the party, then you're soon going to get good candidates and then you're soon going to start winning the courthouses and local elections. And it is important. I never want to overemphasize party as opposed to candidates. I mean I do think, you know, best candidates with a good organization are still the key to winning.

But the Republican Party you got to remember for many years was the only face for a statewide organization for republicans in Georgia. It was the chairman of the party that was turned to by the press or the media or other things that might go on to make a statement. You know, Paul Coverdell was one of the first to break through and he beat Wyche when we had the runoff. I was - - we were getting ready to go to the Philadelphia convention in 2000 when he tragically, you know, died, and suddenly I became again that point person, and I say that not as a point of pride, but it reminded me how important the party's role was up until that point in time. Once you have the U.S. senators and the governors and the statewide offices, the out front part of it is

less important. The organizational part still is.

SHORT: His death was tragic. It left Governor Barnes, Roy Barnes, with a decision of replacing him. He appointed a democrat, Zell Miller. What were your thoughts about that?

CLAY: I personally thought it was a good choice. I mean I wasn't - - you had some people arguing that because Paul was a republican he should have put in a republican. Well that's not - - that may be true, but it ain't real world. Of course he's going to put a democrat there, and he put about a seasoned and as we now know - - we were less sure of that at that time, conservative democrat, probably now more to the chagrin of Roy Barnes than any republican in the state of Georgia who almost claim Zell Miller as one of their own maybe to Zell's chagrin, but I think it was a good decision. It was a shrewd decision and served Georgia well. I sometimes question Zell's sanity for going - - for wanting to go up there after his level of service, but God bless him for doing so.

SHORT: Yeah. Let's go back if you will to your service in the Senate. You served as minority leader.

CLAY: Yes, sir.

SHORT: Tell us a little bit about that responsibility and who calls the shots?

CLAY: Minority leader is one of those wonderful positions that has neither a carrot nor a stick. So other than getting your picture a little higher on the legislative photos on the wall and the Senate chambers, it's one of those that really is purely the art of persuasion because you really don't have a carrot or a stick, and sometimes you do it successfully, sometimes you don't. I enjoyed it immensely because I think it's always an honor to be recognized by your peers in that capacity.

We were still, you know, focused our efforts in many respects we were picking up seats, picking up seats, picking up seats and picking up seats, and it took a little longer than we thought, but to me it was fun and bespoke more a level of I guess excellence of service than it really is major clout. Yes you're going to be asked to be involved. Yes you get to have some discussions with the Governor. Yes you get to be a point person on explaining positions on key bills sometimes when you want to, sometimes when you don't.

But a wonderful learning curve that in many respects sort of confines you in some ways because you have to take party positions as opposed to sometimes your own political positions, but I'd say it'd probably been more fun it been a majority leader, but, you know, things work as they do and we prided ourselves on being a smart, politically savvy alternative. We weren't naïve. We didn't try to burn bridges, but we tried to, where we could, leverage the democrats. Sometimes that's easier to do when you're in the minority to leverage the majority. And with people like the Skin Edges of the world and Sallie and some of the old timers like Jim and Joe, I think Clay Land came in, David Ralston came in, Charlie Tanksley came in. I would have matched those

intellects of those folks against anybody in the General Assembly and I'd feel confident we'd come out ahead every time, and I think we did. I think we created real credibility not just being good senators, but credibility on being a real political alternative that was on its way up. And I'm proud to have been a little part of it.

SHORT: In Georgia a coalition of 11 votes can certainly affect the outcome of legislation in the Senate.

CLAY: Beat most any Constitutional Amendment.

SHORT: Who determines positions from a party standpoint in those legal battles?

CLAY: Well in terms of pure legal battles, the party chairman would hire counsel to go through. Republican party, because we didn't have a governor, came up really was a much more grassroots organization. Republicans elected almost everybody whether it be in the party structure, the executive committees, the local law offices, they were all elected. We all did this committee - - I mean the various conferences and conventions throughout the state and it was a very democratic organization. The democrats generally appointed theirs because the governor was the source of power. The governor controlled everything, and the governor kind of would wink and nod and certain things would almost inevitably occur.

We're not back to that model as yet and they're a little bit more like us now. Since they've lost

the governorship they've come a little more open on it. Party's going to make the decisions that affect party business, party unity. Alec Poitevent, when David Dukes wanted to come to Georgia and run as a republican, Alec Poitevant was the party chairman then and said hell no. You're not going to do it. And I gave him credit for that and he couldn't do it because he called that shot and he controlled who's on the nominee or a potential nominee of the Republican Party and I think that's a good sign.

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