

Ford Spinks interviewed by Bob Short
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Ford Spinks

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short, and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics, sponsored by the Duckworth Library at Young Harris College and the Richard B. Russell Library at the

University of Georgia. Our guest is State Senator and Public Service Commissioner Ford Spinks. Welcome, Ford.

FORD SPINKS: Thank you.

SHORT: Well, with your permission . . .

SPINKS: It's good to have you here.

SHORT: Well, thank you. With your permission we'd like to divide our conversation into three parts. First of all your early life and growing up here in Tift County, how you got interested in politics and your public career, and lastly your life after politics. So let's get started, if you will, by talking about your early life here in Georgia's agricultural belt in Tift county.

SPINKS: Well, I had the good fortune that both my grandparents were close to me in many ways. But my mother, as a little girl, lived about a mile up the road. And my daddy, as a young buck, lived about a half a mile up the road. So I had great grandparents and great parents, so I was very lucky to have been born and brought up in this part of Tift County.

SHORT: And your parents were farmers, were they?

SPINKS: Both of my granddads were farmers. My daddy ran the dairy out at ABAC when he was going to school out there, he and my mother. And then he took a job with a dairy down in Florida. So actually my first year in existence was near Tampa, Florida, a big, wide place in the road called Plant City, I believe. But that was long ago and far away.

SHORT: So you grew up and went to school here in Tifton, or in Tift County.

SPINKS: In Tift County. Our school was up where the fire department is now, Excelsior School. "Excelsior" sort of has several meanings, maybe, but one is that it's supposed to be the best. Well, I don't know if I actually would have applied to the school, but it was a good little country school. I had good teachers. I have no regrets about those schooldays in any way, shape, form or fashion. This was just a wonderful place to grow up and go to school, and everything worked out fine with that.

SHORT: Where did you go to high school?

SPINKS: First year I went to Tifton. And then the war hit, as you remember, and me and my mother and a cousin or two went to Macon to work at Warner Robbins, and that was quite an experience. One little thing that was funny back then, I didn't have a driver's license. I was not old enough to have a vehicle. And to get back and forth to work on the plant every day, I rode my bicycle. And one day the thing started coming apart. The piece that holds the handlebars

broke. And there for about a month, before I could get a new piece, I'd just ride it to work every day without any handlebars. And I wondered if I was where the finger idea was born. Anyway, I'd just see all kind of folks pointing at me as I'd go by, and I'm sure that did look a little funny. But that was at Warner Robbins, and that would have been in, I guess, '43 or '44. But I finished high school at Bonaire. The first year I went to Tifton here and finished at Bonaire. That was another long ago and far away trip.

SHORT: And then you went into the service, into the Army, I think.

SPINKS: Into the Army, yeah.

SHORT: And what did you do in the Army?

SPINKS: Went to Germany. And my cousin, Z. W. Morton, and I rode a bicycle, a motorcycle, a good bit in the community, and I remembered a little about that. And when the Army found out that I knew how to ride a motorcycle, they put me in a motorcycle platoon of the constabulary, 72nd Constabulary at Stuttgart, Germany, and did that for about a year. We always had one more parade to do. And I think we were partly just showboating, but we didn't know that. We didn't have to wear a tie. They gave us a big, pretty yellow scarf, and we wore a scarf instead of a tie. And I guess we did look a little funny compared to what the Germans had been seeing up until then. It was not hard duty, but our job was searching and seizures, is what they

had written down. But the closest I ever came to a search and a seizure was -- it was our job, since we were sort of a do-it-all section of the Army -- this was during the time of the Nuremberg trials, and it was our duty to escort the people who needed to be escorted from the Stuttgart area to Nuremberg for the trials. And we did that for several months.

SHORT: Did you attend any of the trials?

SPINKS: No. We didn't have time to do that. We would just take them up there and come on back. I would have liked that and would have been happy to have done that, but our job was to just deliver the prisoners to that location. And we turned them over to another detail, another guard detail, at that point. So there was no opportunity at all to attend any of the trials. And I thought about that at the time, that I wished they'd let us do that, but, "No, you've got to get back as soon as you can."

SHORT: So after your tour in the service, you came back to Tift County.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: And what happened then?

SPINKS: Well, let me tell you one thing, on one of the trips, I believe his name was Ganto. I

think Ganto was a corporal, and he was on the trip with us going up one of the – I call it a mountain, but probably to people in Germany, the folks in mountainous country, it was probably just a hill. But it was pretty high. Anyway, going up one of these hills, he was going a little faster than he should have been and he let his motorcycle drift over into the oncoming traffic, and he hit a Jeep head on. And the Jeeps that we used over there had this bulletproof shield in front of the driver and the passenger, and something on that shield hit Ganto some place on his head. I didn't ever know the exact specifics of it, but we never saw him again. I think he got over it all right, but he was never the same after that. But that was just part of our job.

SHORT: So you came back to Tifton.

SPINKS: Came back to Tifton after that.

SHORT: And what happened then?

SPINKS: Well, me and a cousin's friend started – we decided we'd go into business, and we built a store up here at Excelsior. We had run one ever since I was a little fellow that my daddy started, but we decided we really needed to build a new one, and did. But television was not big in our area at that time. It was a very small portion of entertainment there. And so we built us a little – we had us some old church benches that we cut down and added to, and we made them down in height so that the person on the back row had as good a vision as the one on the first did.

And we ran a country movie for several years there, four or five years, until that became – I guess we'd lost enough sleep that we decided we needed to do something else, so we discontinued that. But it was interesting that we had the old Roy Rogers and Tom Steele and the old cowboy pictures there. They were plentiful. And we had a lot of fun with the old theater concept, and it served us well for three or four years.

Then what did I do? My dad had looked after my cows while I was gone. I had been in the dairy business prior to being in the Army, and he had looked after them. So we got back in the saddle, so to speak, and started the dairy business again. But we didn't stay with it long that time. My mother was working for the Colquitt County EMC. It was already REA back then. And when I got home, the only kind of new vehicle you could buy was a Jeep, so I bought a new Jeep. And then, after I'd been home about a year, I guess, we were able to buy a car. It wasn't new. It was almost new. And on this day, she told me that she needed to do some work around Tifton that day and I could take the car and she would drive the Jeep, and she did. And she was leaving Tifton, coming home, and a drunk soldier from Albany hit her almost head on and killed her. So that terminated my work with the EMC. I wasn't interested in doing that kind of thing any further.

But that's the only outside employment, I guess, that I've ever had. The rest of my time of being gainfully employed had to do with other endeavors with – well, I don't need to talk about all that. As you might understand, even thinking about the time when my mother was killed is not very pleasant.

SHORT: Somewhere along the line you attended Abraham Baldwin Athletic -- I mean, I'm sorry, not Athletic -- Agricultural College, ABAC here in Tifton.

SPINKS: Yeah. Well, I was going to ABAC when the Army called me first. And then, when I came back, I didn't go back to ABAC, since I had the cows and was in the dairy business. I had branched into Omega and had a route of delivering milk to homes and houses and businesses, and that was going very well. So that was the first thing that I did when I got back was pursue that endeavor for a while.

Somewhere along there I met my wife-to-be. And I didn't know it at the time, but anyway, that developed then. And we went to Macon. Our former pastor at Salem was living in Macon at that time, and after we had gone together for several months, we decided to go to Macon and let him marry us. And so that ended another chapter of my life. And, thank goodness, all of that worked out fine.

SHORT: When did you first get interested in politics?

SPINKS: I had some good friends who thought they were doing me a favor to tell me that they would support me and they'd do thus and so if I'd get involved in it. And what happens so many times is somebody will push someone who is really not interested into a situation because of their likes or dislikes, and I think that's what happened to me. But, still, when I said yes, I said yes.

SHORT: So you first ran for the Georgia Senate. You first ran for the Georgia Senate.

SPINKS: No. I had one little race prior to that. I had had a little situation that caused me a little discomfort with the chairman of the county commissioners, and I ran for that position. And I didn't win, but I guess I must have made some friends that stuck with me through thick and thin. And when I decided to be in politics again, they were really ready to help me the second time.

SHORT: Do you remember your first campaign for the Senate? That was in 1962, as I recall.

SPINKS: Mm-hm. Yeah, I sure do. I thought how unfortunate this is to run for the Senate, get elected and then have to run again. And that was what happened.

SHORT: Let's talk about that for a minute. You ran and got elected, and then they reapportioned . . .

SPINKS: They reapportioned.

SHORT: . . . and you had to run again.

SPINKS: Had to run again.

SHORT: Yeah. What was your district like after they reapportioned it?

SPINKS: Well, in my case, there was no difference. It was Brooks County, Colquitt County and Tift County was the three counties before the reapportionment, and it was the same three counties after the reapportionment. But, of course, having to run twice to get the same job seemed a little unfair.

SHORT: Yeah, we might explain for that. During the days of the county unit system, the senatorial districts were broken down into three counties that rotated the senator every term.

SPINKS: Yes.

SHORT: So after reapportionment, those three counties became a district, and you represented that district.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: But when you ran for reelection, you could do it every time instead of rotating the counties.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: Right.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: So you were elected in '62. You went to the Capitol in '63, and you were part of one of the famous classes in Georgia political history. You remember those days, I'm sure, produced three governors, one president, the mayor of Columbus, captains of industry, generally considered the best Senate in Georgia history. What do you remember about those days?

SPINKS: Well, my memories specifically, as you might imagine, are a little blurred in that I remember generalities, but not too many specific details. But I remember thinking at the time that Jimmy Carter, "He's somebody I could really support, could work for. He's very knowledgeable. And it goes without saying that you can tell that he's educated and has a lot of smarts." And the fact that he was so helpful in the atomic program with Admiral Rickover proved to me that, "Here's a fellow that knew a little more than the average man on the street, and I'd be happy to support him." So when it came time to give him support, to put my mouth where my thoughts had been, it was very easy to support him.

SHORT: You were one of several senators who encouraged him to run for governor in 1966.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: Let's talk a little bit about that race. It was a very strange election.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: Carter was one of several candidates in that race, and he ran a creditable race, but he didn't quite make it to the runoff. He was ousted by Lester Maddox, as you recall. Some people think, Ford, that if that election had last another week or 10 days, Carter might have won. Do you think that's true?

SPINKS: Yes. I thought so at the time. Yeah. And nothing has happened to make me think differently since, yeah.

SHORT: Uh-huh. In the runoff between Governor Arnall and Lester Maddox, did you take any part in that?

SPINKS: No.

SHORT: Did Senator Carter? Did Senator Carter support either one of those two candidates?

SPINKS: Not to my knowledge.

SHORT: Okay.

SPINKS: His campaign had not really cranked up at that point. We were still getting started. The fact that you were not on the scene then proves that we were just getting ready to . . .

SHORT: To go for the next time.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: Yeah. Yeah. Well, he spent four years running for election in 1970 against former Governor Carter, who was very much ahead in the polls.

SPINKS: Former Governor Maddox.

SHORT: Well, he ran against Governor Sanders. We both are getting it a little confused. In 1970, former Governor Sanders . . .

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: . . . who was substantially ahead in the polls at the beginning of that race.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: What do you think happened that got Carter ahead?

SPINKS: I think his running proved to a majority of the electorate that, "Here's an average man, an honest man, an educated man, here's somebody that I won't be ashamed of in any way, shape, form or fashion, and I'd like to help him."

SHORT: Let's go back a minute, if you will, to 1966 when Maddox was the Democratic nominee and Bo Callaway was the Republican nominee, and nobody won the general election; it went into the legislature. You were in the legislature at that time. How did you vote?

SPINKS: I voted for Lester.

SHORT: I'm sure that that's the way your district voted, was it?

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: Were you ever ashamed of casting that vote?

SPINKS: Probably so, but I can't recall an instance at the moment.

SHORT: Yeah. What did you think of Maddox as a governor? Some people gave him good marks, thought he was an efficient governor. Did you think that?

SPINKS: At that point I was not close enough really to have formed an opinion about that, and so the question sort of hits me cold.

SHORT: How do you think he treated rural Georgia?

SPINKS: Lester was more of a political person than a lot of folks gave him credit for. There might have been some exceptions when things didn't go as well as they could have, but, by and large, he did an admirable job, really. If I had had the ability to have changed two or three things at the time, I probably would have. But then, again, that's long ago and far away.

SHORT: In 1970, when Jimmy Carter was elected governor, Lester Maddox was elected lieutenant governor, which was rare in our state.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: That had never happened before. And during that campaign, both Carter and Sanders were vying for an endorsement from Maddox, and I think you had a role in that episode.

SPINKS: Yes. I think that, if I understand it, what really went on was the endorsement by Lester of Carl had already taken place, or rather the document stating that, but it was not to be made public 'til another hour or two later. And the Carter campaign got word of it somehow, so I was sort of designated to – I wasn't sort of -- I was designated to turn that around and not let that become public knowledge. I had a list of 12 people who was close to Lester, close enough to have made some influence in his thinking, so I started looking for the 12. One was Zell Miller. And I found Zell, talked to him about the situation, and he didn't think he could help me. So I found Governor Griffin. He was in Tallahassee with his wife. His wife was in the hospital in Tallahassee, and he was there with her, and that's where I found him. That's why I remember that much about that. Now, some of the other folks, I'd have to go back and look at my list and see who the other people were. But it did finally work out all right. But I tell you who gets credit. Peyton Hawes was the one fellow that responded in the affirmative. He responded in a way that he said he would help, and did.

SHORT: Do you think an endorsement of Sanders by Maddox would have made any difference?

SPINKS: Bob, I don't know now, but I know that at that time, when this was happening, we all

thought it would have made a difference. All that I heard express any views about it thought it would have made a difference.

SHORT: Well, Maddox was very popular at the time.

SPINKS: Yes.

SHORT: He was. And I'm sure he would have had some influence. But I always felt that Carter would have won anyway, that he had done a tremendous job of campaigning against Sanders and making Sanders look liberal and rich and all of that. And people just weren't ready for that at the time.

SPINKS: Mm-hm. Well, that's true.

SHORT: Now, going forward there, Maddox, when he became lieutenant governor, accused Governor Carter and his friends in the Senate of trying to take over the Senate. Was there any organized move to do that?

SPINKS: Not to my knowledge.

SHORT: Well, you would certainly know, because you were one of Governor Carter's biggest,

strongest friends there in the Senate and worked with him on his legislation and that sort of thing. One of the big issues that became very, very controversial with Maddox was his reorganization plan.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: He had no problems in the House, but he had problems with Maddox in getting it through the Senate. Do you remember all that?

SPINKS: Vaguely.

SHORT: Well, tell us about it.

SPINKS: That's one of those things that was long ago and far away.

SHORT: Yeah.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: We were talking about reorganization and Governor Carter's primary plank in his campaign platform. He was able to pass legislation to reorganize the state government.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: Do you think that that has worked efficiently?

SPINKS: Bob, I really haven't had any occasion to evaluate any part of that reorganization.

SHORT: Well, let me get your opinion here. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the highest, how would you rate the Carter administration when he was governor of Georgia?

SPINKS: How would I rate Carter?

SHORT: As compared to other governors.

SPINKS: Now, this question implies that all the governors did well.

SHORT: Right.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: Every governor in my lifetime that I can remember had some very positive things to

their administration.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: My thinking was that at that particular point that Jimmy Carter might have been a little more advanced than most of the other governors at that point.

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: Of course, as the state grew and as the economy grew, governors got a little more money to do more things with.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: But I guess what I'm asking is, do you think he was poor, average, good or excellent as a governor, in your view, while you were in the Senate?

SPINKS: Well, I think that question was answered by the electorate of the United States, because when the people of the United States pass judgment on a fellow, you can't get any higher than that. And so given that, that means that the majority of people in the United States agreed, and there's no higher court in the land than the court of public opinion of all of our

people.

SHORT: Governor Carter appointed you to the Public Service Commission. Let's talk for a minute about that. What does a public service commissioner do?

SPINKS: Well, the gas, the electric, radio, utilities of our country comes under their supervision. The Public Service Commission has to make sure that the companies that are in this business maintain the healthy financial situation that allows them to provide the services that the people want. And that's the reason there has to be rate increases. That's just the way the system works. For them to be able to provide those services, they have to build plants and put in more equipment. And we don't have the luxury of just denying a rate increase request just because we don't want to pay more for electricity or for telephone service or gas or whatever. The companies have to be in position, which means they have to have the equipment for there to be a generating plant, or whether it be more telephone wires. They have to have that, and the law says that the Public Service Commission has to provide that money that gives them the ability to provide these services.

SHORT: Well, that is a political office, and it's statewide. So when you ran for reelection, you had to run statewide.

SPINKS: Yes.

SHORT: A little bit different than running from three counties.

SPINKS: A whole lot different. Yeah.

SHORT: How do you go about a statewide race like that?

SPINKS: Very carefully. It's just like any campaign anywhere. You call on your friends. You call on your friends to help you. And if you have been trying to be a good public servant, most times the people will respond.

SHORT: Those elections are very costly, aren't they?

SPINKS: Mm-hm.

SHORT: I mean, if you have to use television.

SPINKS: Very costly, yeah.

SHORT: How do you go about raising enough money to do that?

SPINKS: Very carefully. Very carefully. Because if you're not careful about that, there are all kind of pitfalls that you can encounter with public funds that are generated like that. But the public was good in my behalf. Everything worked out well for each encounter with whatever possibilities might have been at that time.

SHORT: You ran how many times?

SPINKS: It must have been three times.

SHORT: Three times.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: Why did you decide to leave the commission?

SPINKS: You get to thinking after a while that enough's enough, and you get tired and worn out. It starts becoming a thankless job in that not enough people realize that the commission is there by law, and what it has to do it has to do by law. So I don't think that's ever been explained adequately for the general public to understand. I really think that's the gist of the job of being public service commissioner. It's a thankless job, because some folks have the idea that we can do anything we want to. Well, you might up to a point. But if the law had been written

that says you've got to do certain things, then you try to do what you've got to do.

SHORT: Ford, getting back to Governor Carter for a minute, when did you first suspect that he was thinking about running for president?

SPINKS: I can remember that, but I don't remember anything that I could tie it to that would make sense to you.

SHORT: You remember the document that Hamilton Jordan was supposed to have written while Jimmy Carter was governor that outlined the steps that he needed to take to run for president.

Were you aware at that point that he was going to do it?

SPINKS: No. I knew that he had that in mind, but at that point I was not aware of the fact that he was going to. I guess, knowing him, I should have known that he was.

SHORT: What was your reaction when you learned that he was ready to announce for president? Was there doubt in your mind about his ability to win?

SPINKS: Yeah. I remember thinking, "I know he has the intelligence. He has the savvy. He has the education. He's got all the needed elements to be that. But would this be rushing it just a little bit?" I guess what it was is that, at that point, I hadn't thought about it enough to convince

myself that now's the time. I knew that he was capable and that he had all the little extras that he needed to be able to do it, but I was fearful that we might be trying to move just a little too fast.

SHORT: Mm-hm. Well, he did a tremendous job of campaigning with his family and with Hamilton with him. Hamilton had certainly a brilliant political mind.

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: Don't you think?

SPINKS: Yeah.

SHORT: During that period there was problems in the Republican Party. President Nixon had resigned. President Ford had been made vice president and later president without running for either office. And there was disarray in that party at that time. Do you think that that helped President Carter and the Democrats in that year, 1976?

SPINKS: No doubt it did.

SHORT: Do you think that President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon helped the Democrats?

SPINKS: I'd have to say yes, but I'd have to say, too, that it hurt them more than it helped them.

SHORT: How is that, now?

SPINKS: Well, most of the voters are probably a little more savvy than some of us old codgers might want to think.

SHORT: How were you involved in the Carter campaign. Were you on the Peanut Brigade?

SPINKS: Bob, I don't think you'd find my name on anybody's list, but I was making appearances for him and, in some cases, making talks for him and so forth before the Peanut Brigades really got going. So I was there. I just didn't get credit for it.

SHORT: Let's go back to a minute, if you will, to Ford Spinks. Is there anything that we've left out, Senator, that you'd like to talk about?

SPINKS: No. I'll think of something after you've gone, I'm sure.

SHORT: Yeah.

SPINKS: Yeah. "Why didn't I think of this, and why didn't I tell you this?"

SHORT: Well, we've enjoyed having you as our guest. And I want to thank you on behalf of Young Harris College and the University of Georgia for being with us today.

SPINKS: Well, thank you, Bob.

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Ford Spinks**

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