

Dick Pettys interviewed by Bob Short
2010 February 1
Atlanta, GA
Reflections on Georgia Politics
ROGP-102
Original: video, 76 minutes

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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 Dick Pettys who for 35 years served as Georgia's State Capitol correspondent for the *Associated Press*. Welcome, Dick. We're delighted to have you.

DICK PETTYS: Bob, it's a pleasure to be here in this distinguished company, and you being distinguished company. My respects to you. It's a pleasure to be with you.

SHORT: Thank you so much. Dick, when you were growing up in Atlanta, did you dream of being a political reporter?

PETTYS: No, I really did not. I dreamed of being first of all a writer, and then I had this crazy idea that I was going to somehow get involved in the movie business. So I figured okay, one way to start learning that craft was to go to journalism school. And you know, I wrote a lot as a kid for my own entertainment. But I got the bug for journalism at the University of Georgia where I majored in the *Red & Black*, and was able to take some courses under Dean Drury. Norman Underwood -- you remember Norman? -- was his teaching assistant one year and graded one or two of my papers. And I had some discussions about his grading system years later. But a great guy.

So, like I said, I caught the bug and I forgot about the other initial goals and decided to go into journalism. I really hadn't thought about politics. I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do, but my first job was for a very small chain of newspapers in Gwinnett County that Bob Fowler had just purchased. It was the *Lawrenceville News-Herald* -- a weekly; the *News of Gwinnett* -- a weekly; and the *Buford Advertiser* -- also a weekly. And that summer, he turned that into the *Gwinnett Daily News*. I stayed there for four years, became associate editor. And from there I went to AP, and very shortly became the political guy for AP over here.

SHORT: Tell us about growing up in Atlanta.

PETTYS: Boy, it was different. And I've thought about this looking back now. It almost seemed like you had -- Atlanta wasn't really a big city as much as it was a collection of communities. I grew up in the Morning Side community, and then not far down the road you had the Virginia Highlands community. Each one seemed to have a little different flavor. The houses were a little different in one place from another. There was kind of a close-knit feel to it. A kid my age could take the -- let's see, I guess it was called the Atlanta Transit System at the time? -- whatever it's called -- the bus system, and go downtown and do whatever you needed to do without too much fear of walking the streets by yourself. It was a nicer, gentler, quiet place. As I said, I grew up in Morning Side and I can remember many nights just laying there listening to the quiet outside the house. There's not quiet outside that house anymore. You've got cars going by at all hours of the day and night.

SHORT: So you --

PETTYS: It was nice. Oh, one other thing. We had cows not far from where I grew up. Beside of what is now Ansley Mall, I had a friend -- a little girl who was in first grade with me. She invited me over to her house one afternoon. Now, of course, my mother took me over there. And in the back of their house -- they fronted Monroe -- but at the back was a cow pasture, and there were cows where Ansley Mall now stands. That was kind of profound.

SHORT: So, you came to the State Capitol in 1970.

PETTYS: Yeah, May of 1970.

SHORT: As the correspondent for the *Associated Press*. What was your reaction to the state government when you first arrived?

PETTYS: Well, my personal reaction was this -- let's see, I guess I was 25, maybe. And my first reaction was seeing the old hands over here who had been covering the place for years and years and years. Charlie Pew was still the big man. I don't know that I ever saw him much over here. But Steve Ball from the *Journal*. Gosh, who else do you have? Bob Cone from what's now *Morris*. Selby McCash, Merle Sellers from *Columbus*. And I thought, "How in the world am I going to compete with these guys when I'm working for this huge news service?" And you know, "I need to be carrying my own weight here. How am I going to do this?" One of the first people that I got to know over here was the governor's chief of staff, who at the time was Zell Miller.

SHORT: That was Governor Maddox.

PETTYS: Yeah, exactly. So I went in to see him. At the time the chief of staff was in the little office -- as you go in the governor's office -- the little office to the left. Went in and I was right surprised. He actually treated me like I was one of the group; that I knew what I was doing -- which of course I didn't. And I'm sure he knew that and I knew that. But you know, he pretended like I was. And that made it a lot easier. And I've remembered that to this day, because he made it easier for me to start doing what I would do.

SHORT: How did you operate, Dick, in a field of seasoned reporters who were always looking for a scoop?

PETTYS: Well, it was tough. I mean, literally, you had to figure out where they're getting their stuff from, and how can I do the same thing. And it frankly just takes time. You've got to develop friendships and relationships, and probably more importantly, you have to develop a reputation with the people that you're covering as somebody who will -- if they give you some confidential information -- that you'll treat it that way. You're not going to burn them. There's got to be a two-way street there in terms of trust. You've got to trust that they're giving you good information. They've got to trust that if they tell you something that's off the record, it's off the record. That just takes time. You know, the little stuff, the routine stuff, the press releases that come to you, those things. And the opinions from the attorney general that you'd go check out -- all those things are just routines of doing the job.

I think the job is easier to do now. There wasn't email back then. You actually had to put some shoe leather -- burn off some shoe leather, walk to these agencies, get to know the secretaries. Very, very important part of my job was getting to know the secretary so, you know, if something big was happening they'd call me, or if I needed to call their boss, they wouldn't block me. Secretaries are really, really important in state government. I suppose in business as well. But it's a lot easier now with email. And holy cow, all this stuff you can do with

telephones. Sure is a lot easier.

SHORT: Oh yeah. So, you rely on sources.

PETTYS: Absolutely, rely on sources. Now, back when I was a good deal younger, and when I was starting out over here, we used to be able to quote sources. The rule was that, you know, you had to have at least two sources. I think later that came out to be three separate sources. And the bosses had to know who your sources were. They had to keep that confidential.

Dwayne Rayner and I one evening -- it was a Sunday night, and as was our typical practice, we were making the rounds -- this was in the early '70s -- of the hotels to catch legislators, find out what was coming up the next day; because in that news era, people really read your political news about the Legislature. It was a whole different way of covering it. And we would -- every Sunday night -- go out to the hotels, the caucus rooms, the hospitality suites and just talk to folks. On one particular night, we -- and this is 30 years ago, so it's probably okay to say -- but we went up to the suite where the speaker of the House was holding forth as he usually did. This was George L. Smith, who was a very distinguished gentleman. He truly was. And we talked to him briefly about what was coming up on the floor the next day. And you know, there was a bit of modest news about it. I don't remember what it was now, but that doesn't matter. At the end of this, instead of at the beginning, I said, "Okay, can we quote you?" He said, "No, I don't think so." I said, "Well, what about a source?" He thought about it a minute and he said, "Okay, but make it a high capitol source," which was just kind of classic. That was a lot of fun.

And you know, that was kind of the way it was back in that era. You know, the legislators were approachable. You know, both on the floor and off the floor. There wasn't the same adversarial relationship as the one that developed in the Watergate and post-Watergate era. It was easy to get to them. They kind of trusted you, you kind of trusted them. Was it the best way of handling it? Well, I don't know. But for the time that's the way it worked.

SHORT: Did you ever have to pass up a story because you really couldn't verify your tip? Or it wouldn't meet your satisfaction?

PETTYS: Yeah. And nothing's coming to mind right now, but I know that there were things that I knew and thought I could develop, but I just didn't have it nailed down properly. There were story lines that I wanted to pursue, that I knew would make good stories and needed to be told, but would have required too great an investment of time for one person and may or may not have been gettable. So, yeah, there were those times.

SHORT: In addition to your being a political reporter, you also had to be an investigative reporter. Didn't you?

PETTYS: There were occasions, yeah.

SHORT: Can you think of any?

PETTYS: Well, the one that comes to mind is the legislative slush fund. And this was

back during Miller's first term. I believe he called us all out to the mansion for a signing ceremony for the budget. And he announced at that time that he had vetoed a section of the budget that nobody seemed to be able to understand what it was all about. It wasn't big compared to the rest of the budget, but you know, we looked at it, and it seemed pretty mysterious. So, I pursued that somewhat and found that it was a slush fund, which had been used over several years to provide hidden funding for projects in certain legislators' district. These were typically the legislators who needed a little help with their electoral issues, but who also were in good with the House leadership. And that actually figured in the challenge that year, and I think that was 2000 -- I think that was 1992, excuse me. The DuBose Porter race to Tom Murphy. He, of course, didn't win. But he made that one of the themes in his campaign in calling for change. DuBose being a Democrat and Tom Murphy being a Democrat as well. So, that was definitely an issue, and it did result the following year in legislation requiring them to spell out exactly what grants are in the budget for local districts. And that's still there today.

SHORT: Well, you've covered many significant stories over the years. Which are most deeply imbedded in your memory?

PETTYS: Wow. You know, gosh I really, really have not thought about that. But one of the most poignant, I think, is one from recent years, and that was the death of Tom Murphy. And I've talked to enough other reporters to know that I'm not the only one who felt effected by his loss. I mean, we had covered him for years and years and years. And you know, it's one of those situations you think is never going to change. And first of all, you know, he had been defeated for reelection in his own district, so that took him out of the political picture. And then he suffered a stroke, and lingered for a number of years and then passed away. As I reexamined why I felt a sense of sadness and loss, I think it was -- I reevaluated my whole perspective on him. Previously, it had been kind of reporter-speaker -- kind of an adversarial situation. But I think I came to realize that while he did it his way in an old-school fashion, he was a very significant figure in the states' historical and political development. And it was a rare privilege to have been able to watch him play his role on the state stage.

SHORT: You came here when Lester Maddox was governor.

PETTYS: Oh yes.

SHORT: Governor Maddox was not all that friendly with the press. How did you get along with him?

PETTYS: Well, we had our ups and downs. But probably more ups than downs. As you well know, he wasn't able to run again for governor after four years, because the constitution at the time set that four-year limit. Then you lay out of it for four years, and then you can run again. Well, he ran for lieutenant governor and won. And the governor who succeeded him was Jimmy Carter, and that was just -- oh my Lord, that was just a classic mismatch. If you ever wanted to create the perfect mismatch in state government, you'd put Jimmy Carter as governor and Lester as lieutenant governor. You know, I'm sure there were a number of reasons for that. And I've heard Lester explain them in the past. And maybe you've got somebody who's a good light on that who's going to explain it.

But it was not just my practice, but the reporters of the time -- I told you -- practiced this business in a little different way. Sunday nights -- besides going out making the rounds of things like the urban caucus and the hotel rooms and hospitality suites -- we'd try to get the governor on the phone and see what he had to say, and maybe the majority leader or speaker when we could get them. Or the lieutenant governor. Well, Jeff Nesmith from the *Constitution* and I happened to catch up with Lester one Sunday evening as he was about to address some big banquet -- several hundred people there. I think it was on top of the old Dinkler Plaza Hotel. I know I had called Carter already that evening, and he was ripping Lester for some reason or other. So, we caught up with Lester, I think before he went on. And so I told him what Carter had said, trying to get a reaction. And he didn't really react. He didn't give me a good enough quote, in essence. I pushed him a little bit to try to get a better quote. Come on, you do that. And I did it. And he really got mad. He let loose. He called me a long-haired devil and said he was going to call my boss and get me fired. Well, the background of this is this was in the '70s and I was young and I had let my hair grow out. And so, actually, that got on the front page of the *Constitution* the next morning, with Lester calling me a long-haired devil and threatening to get me fired. And then Hal Gulliver, who was the editor of the *Constitution*, I think the next day wrote an editorial making fun of the whole thing by suggesting that Lester may have called me 'devil' because I was one of those -- as he described it -- one of those State Capitol reporter devils who blew the whistle on the pay raise he tried to sneak through the Senate the year before. But until recently I had not lived down the long-haired devil name. Republicans who are in the House now have not really heard the story, but while the Democrats were in charge -- well, Terry Coleman, for instance, used to run around calling me devil and so on. So, we had some fun with that. Lester, as you well know, was a much misunderstood person, and really ought to get much higher marks in my view than he typically is given. I think history will show that he was pretty darn good governor.

SHORT: I think most people will agree with you, really. I think a lot of people will. Those who know government. Now tell me about Jimmy Carter and his administration.

PETTYS: I'll have to tell you about his administration, but then I'm going to have to give you a little bit about his presidential term as well. If you don't mind? Is that okay?

SHORT: That's fine.

PETTYS: He was easy to get to for a reporter. He answered your questions. He was good about holding budget briefings for the press a day or so before giving the speech -- the budget speech to the Legislature. I can remember getting his inaugural address the night before. I think all of his budget addresses the night before. And you know, that's a pretty big deal, because it helps you understand a, what the guy is trying to say and then write your story so it's coherent. And you can have it ready to go on hold for release or whatever basis you put it out on. And then you can just top it with reacts and comments. That's become a thing of the past. In the most recent state of the state, we've had -- the two, I think, most recent -- we did not get them until the address had started. So that makes it kind of tough. Budget -- now we're just getting it electronically, not getting hard copies of it. That also makes it tough.

But at any rate, so Carter was fairly easy to deal with in that regard. His folks -- I think Jody Powell was a better press secretary than most people thought he would be. Harry Murphy

from the *Journal*, for instance, once asked -- well, he asked Carter when he announced Jody as his press secretary -- he said, "You're the only governor I've ever seen who's made his driver his press secretary." I've forgotten what the reaction was from Carter, but it was certainly to defend Jody. And he turned out to do a very good job, I thought.

So, from that standpoint he was fairly easy to deal with. Prickly, yes. But I guess my best Jimmy Carter story comes after he had been president and was coming back to Georgia after failing to win the reelection. I had covered the first part of his presidential campaign up through the convention in New York. And then of course, every time he would come back to Georgia I'd be the local AP guy to get the local angle of that and write a story about what he said to whoever and you know, this that and the other. But I noticed something funny about Jimmy. He and I had known each other pretty well from the time he was governor. But I'd see him coming down the rope line, and he never seemed to look in my direction. Never got this sense of recognition. You know, nothing like that. And I guess I was a little bit surprised at that.

But let me fast-forward to -- he's out of office now, and he's just written his first book. And the publisher sends me a publisher's copy for review. And Jimmy is holding a news conference to talk about his book. Well, I'm thinking, "Okay, maybe I should take this book with me to the news conference and get him to sign it." And I think, "No, you know, that probably wouldn't be the most professional thing I could do." So I didn't. So I got there, and everybody and his brother had a copy of the book, getting him to autograph it. Well, okay, that's you know, whatever. And so I filed my story off the news conference. And I'm going out the room. I think a lot of the other people had already left. And as I do so, Carter's coming out the other way, and we can't help but run into each other. And I said something like, "Well, Mr. President, I'm sorry. I meant to bring the book to get you to autograph it, and I failed to do that." He said, "That's alright. Just send it to the office in Atlanta and they'll send it to me in Plains and I'll sign it." So I did that. In fact, that afternoon I took the book over to his Atlanta office.

And they called me a few weeks later and said, "Well Dick, the book is back." I said, "Great. I'll come get it. I can't wait to see it." And they said, "Well, wait a minute. There's something you need to know about that book." And I'm thinking, "Well what in the world can there be to know about the book?" And he said, "Well --" "Well what?" He said, "Well you know, there're several different kinds of books that we've put out. We've got the 300 dollar book that's with the Morocco leather and the gold leaf and all this kind of stuff. And in those, he'll write a little something to the person -- name the person, write a little something, write his whole name." I said, "Oh, good." "And then there's the 60 dollar book, and that's a good book. It's not the leather, it doesn't have the gold leaf, but it's a good, solid book. And in those he'll sign his full name. And what you have is the publisher's addition -- the 20 dollar book. And in those he just puts his initials, J.C." And I thought, "Okay, you know, thank you very much. I'll come get it, you know, as soon as I can find the time." And I just never found the time to go get that book. But that's a pretty good little story about Jimmy, I think.

SHORT: You covered his entire administration as governor.

PETTYS: Well, yeah.

SHORT: Were you surprised when he ran for president?

PETTYS: They had been putting out signals for a number of months that he might do that.

But yeah, I think I was surprised. I mean, and I had heard those rumors and I had heard what they had said. But I actually didn't think he was going to do it. But he did do it.

SHORT: Do you remember the convention in 1972 in Miami when Carter lobbied for a place on the ticket of Scoop Jackson as vice president? I know you were there.

PETTYS: No, actually I wasn't there.

SHORT: You weren't there?

PETTYS: I wasn't there. I wasn't at that convention. I was at the '76 convention. I wasn't at '72. No, but he was watching things very, very closely at that time. And watching the McGovern rules very closely. I think he had detached Hamilton Jordan at that time for duty to essentially to monitor things for him.

SHORT: Right.

PETTYS: But no, I'd love to hear you tell me about that convention.

SHORT: Well, that was the rumor at the convention, that he was -- you know, he had nominated Scoop Jackson, as I recall, and they were pretty close.

PETTYS: I do remember that they were close.

SHORT: And that he wanted to be vice president at that time. But he parlayed that, you know, into a nation-wide job raising money -- I think it was -- for the Democratic Congressional Committee. And he went around the country -- he and Bob Strauss. So he laid the groundwork.

PETTYS: He did.

SHORT: And he ran a tremendous campaign in 1976. You said you covered part of that.

PETTYS: Yeah, I did. Let's see, I think I picked him up in maybe fairly late in the campaign, like May. And then went with him through the convention. That was when we had three people from AP assigned to him full-time. And so, I was one of those three.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about Carter's successor, George Busbee. You knew George very well?

PETTYS: I did.

SHORT: And his race was against Governor Maddox.

PETTYS: It was. And of course, he won, not just against Lester, but I think Bert Lance was in that race. Good heavens, I think there were -- what? -- six or eight or ten people in there.

SHORT: A lot of people.

PETTYS: And it turned out -- if I'm remembering correctly -- Lester was in a deep hole after that campaign. And Busbee as governor helped raise money to make him whole, which says something about the politicians of that day. I'm not sure you'd find that in today's climate. But you did then. And it also says something about Busbee, who as far as I can tell was a thoroughly decent man. It was a lot of fun to cover. I'd known him when he was majority leader in the House. Of course, he was a lawyer, so he loved to parry questions and answers with you. I don't think any reporter ever got the best of him with a question. He always had an answer, and usually it was funny. But he didn't really make a joke at your expense so that people would laugh at you, but they would laugh with you. And he had a great report with the press. He had a number of parties -- like annual parties -- for the press at the mansion. And things just were very relaxed while he was -- you know, during those soirees, I guess.

SHORT: Well, his emphasis was on trade, and he did a lot of missions. Did you ever join him on any of those missions?

PETTYS: No, I did not go. I don't think he could have foreseen -- I mean, Georgia needed the business at the time. I don't think he could have foreseen at the time the consequences that that would have 20 or 30 years later in terms of the planning for growth that needed to have been done at some point after that. But didn't get done. So, it was a mixed blessing. It brought economic development and opportunity to the state. But it also laid the groundwork for all the traffic congestion and the growing school cost and that sort of thing that we're really still dealing with now. There were efforts by subsequent governors to do something about that. Joe Frank Harris, for instance, had a proposal late in his term to do something about that. One of his big ideas was impact fees on developers and so on to help mitigate some of the costs that new schools and so on and so forth. That didn't get anywhere. And by the time Zell Miller became governor, Miller had his own set of priorities.

SHORT: Well, let's talk about his successor. Joe Frank Harris.

PETTYS: Well, Joe Frank is a guy who once described himself as a vanilla kind of governor. And he was in that sense that he was not flamboyant. He wasn't colorful. But he did some pretty profound things that he doesn't really get enough credit for. One that was probably the most important was the Basic Education Act in 1985, which totally rewrote the way we funded and operated schools. Did a lot of great things. Maybe some things that were not so great. Took driver training out of schools, I think we're paying the price for that right now if you've been on the roads recently. But I think everybody thinks that that was quite a success, has not been built on, as I'm sure he thought it would be.

He also had some issues that he had to deal with as governor. The Sam Caldwell case. He was fairly forceful with that. The ticket fixings scandal at the state patrol, which really put him at cross purposes with Tom Murphy, who helped him come into office. So, he dealt with all of those fairly forcefully.

SHORT: Refresh our memory on the Sam Caldwell case. Sam Caldwell was a constitutional officer.

PETTYS: Sam was labor commissioner. And he had some folks who had been with him for a long time, and there was kind of a widespread belief that he kind of ran a political machine. I'm a little hazy on the details myself. There was a federal fraud indictment, I believe. Isn't that right? I think that's right.

SHORT: I think that's right, yes.

PETTYS: And the big question was, "So what are we going to do about this?" And ultimately he was forced to resign. Joe Frank, behind the scenes, played a huge role in that. And Sam, in fact, did some time. He was replaced by Joe Tanner, who had been DNR commissioner, and was Joe Frank's Mr. Fix-it. He was widely regarded as having modernized and reformed that department.

SHORT: Now, Dick, let's go to 1990. A vacant governor's chair. A lot of people wanted to sit in it.

PETTYS: They did, yeah.

SHORT: And what do you remember about that race?

PETTYS: I remember that as being the first campaign that brought Georgia into the modern political age. The age of campaigning by raising massive amounts of money and putting it into massive TV buys. And bringing us Ragin' Cajun James Carville, thanks to Zell Miller. That's what I remember about it. And let's see, Zell Miller, of course, became the Democratic nominee, but only after defeating Andrew Young in a runoff, with Roy Barnes coming in third. Among Republicans, Guy Millner made the first of three runs -- three self-funded runs -- that year. And it was a heck of a campaign.

A couple of things that stand out. One is that in what I guess was the final debate of that campaign -- or one of the final ones -- Miller and Isaakson were at the Temple here in Atlanta on a Sunday evening, and Miller was commenting on his father's real estate business. And Johnny managed to get the better of him by making out that Miller had insulted his father, and wagging a finger and saying, "Don't you insult my father, Zell Miller." And so, it was a good campaign to watch and cover. Miller pulled it out, but it was something of a squeaker. I don't think it was as much of a squeaker as his reelection campaign was, which was also a great campaign to watch.

SHORT: I think it was 52-47 percent that Miller won by. And that year, the main plank in his platform was the lottery.

PETTYS: Yeah, HOPE Scholarship.

SHORT: And that finally passed. But it took time to implement it, because of investigations by the legislature and lawsuits over the awarding of a computer contract. Did you cover that thing?

PETTYS: Just in general. You know, we just hit the highlights of the thing. At the

Capitol, being one person, there's always another story that you're following in addition to the one that you want to be following. So no, I didn't follow the implementation that much.

SHORT: Right. I meant to ask you -- and I haven't already -- but being a wire service reporter that writes for several newspapers around the state, are your duties different from, say, a reporter for the Atlanta papers or the Augusta papers, who write only for that paper?

PETTYS: Not that much different in terms of the things that you always keep in mind. You know, trying to be as objective as you can, trying to get both sides, this that and the other. But we served, I think, probably 30 newspapers in Georgia and God knows how many radio and TV stations, in addition to when we'd have stuff that would get on the A wire or on the international wire. That would go around the world. But you really had to be meticulously careful, because with that many different outlets, somebody was bound to say that, "Oh gee, this is slanted," because of their opinion.

In fact, not that long ago -- oh, I guess the one thing -- a couple of things that may be on point. When I wrote Maddox's obituary I got ripped by someone on the internet saying that it took me 20 paragraphs to get down to the fact that Lester Maddox was a Democrat. Well, you know, anybody who read that story who didn't know that Lester was a Democrat really didn't need to read the story. I mean, I'm sorry. I guess I'm being a little parochial in my outlook there, but that's a story that people -- yeah, I could have thrown it in somewhere, but in my own mind, I'm sorry. I guess it's my failing. Of course he was a Democrat. But that's an example of how different people will look at something and get torched. So you do have to be careful about those kind of things. And once something gets on the internet, it stays there forever. I came across that not long ago.

And then I also got ripped by one of the gay rights organizations. I had been writing about one of the rulings involving Mike Bowers, and one of my New York editors decided the story should say -- we would be quoting somebody and say, "Who was a self-described such and such." A self-described lesbian, I think, was the term we were looking for. So that got these people on the internet all hot and bothered, that that was an archaic sort of terminology. So, you know, writing for AP, you've got a really much larger audience. And the importance of being right down the line -- meticulously down the line as it's kind of magnified for that reason.

SHORT: Well, I was going to ask you the question of what impact the internet has had on newspaper political coverage with all the political blogs. First of all, how do you know that you can believe those accusations or charges?

PETTYS: On the internet?

SHORT: Used on the internet.

PETTYS: Well, I think you've hit it. It's a problem. The chatter has expanded. You know, there was a time when you could look at the newspaper nameplate and you'd know, "Okay, this paper is coming at it from a conservative or liberal standpoint." Okay, that's fine. I know the name of the guy who wrote this. Or you'd turn on, you know, WSB or WAGA or whatever, and you'd kind of know where the news was coming from. With blogs you don't. And with talk radio, talk TV, you know, I think we're in danger of having an overload of information

that makes it all kind of trivial, frankly. And I think that's a shame. And newspapers are hurting, and I think that's a terrible shame. You know, once we lose newspapers, and we might, then if this is what we're going to, then we're in a lot of trouble. Did that answer your question at all?

SHORT: Yes, it does. It really does. And then there's the --

PETTYS: I'm sorry, let me -- people go to school for a long time and practice their trade for a long time in journalism school to know what -- you know, we're not perfect. Nobody is ever going to be perfectly objective, no matter how hard you try. It's just an impossible goal. The important thing is to try -- is to make that effort, and to do it as well as you possibly can. And you know, there are acceptable practices in journalism. And there are unacceptable practices. And blogs and things of that nature are not held to those standards.

SHORT: How about the 24-hour news stations --

PETTYS: Awful.

SHORT: That continually --

PETTYS: Awful. You know, and I can understand what they're doing, because I did it myself. When there wasn't a lot of news, you'd try to get -- and you had an idea, you'd try to get somebody riled up by saying, "Hey, did you know that so-and-so just said this about you? That's pretty bad, isn't it?" And you know, that was so easy to do when Jimmy and Lester were in office.

SHORT: And Murphy and Miller.

PETTYS: And Murphy and Miller, absolutely. I mean, a guaranteed story right there. Now, was it good public policy? Well, I don't think it hurt that much. Nothing wrong with having a good healthy debate, but we've gone far beyond that in this country. And I know I don't listen to everything that's out there, but we have a certain fair and balanced network that's on my television every morning, because my wife likes to watch that -- and you know, I know what's going on. They've contributed to this climate as much as anybody else.

SHORT: Speaking of Murphy and Miller and their celebrated feud, you wrote this. And I want to read it. "Make no mistake, there was real respect, and yes, even affection between Tom Murphy and Zell Miller. Though you would never have known it from the way Murphy introduced Miller, on occasion, as extinguished lieutenant governor or the way Miller referred to Murphy's house as being a mausoleum for his legislative initiatives."

PETTYS: I did write that. That sounds very familiar.

SHORT: Well, that pretty well sums it up, I think.

PETTYS: Thank you. Do you agree?

SHORT: I agree. I think they had a lot in common. They were feuders and fussers and they knew how to rattle each other's cages. But on no occasion did I ever feel that it was personal.

PETTYS: And that's different from today, isn't it?

SHORT: It is. Very much so, yes. One other thing before we get into Zell Miller running for governor, which was in 1990. We did that, right? We've already done that?

PETTYS: Hmm-mm.

SHORT: Before reelection in 1994 is what I want to talk about. But Zell Miller likes to tell the story about your ability as a health reporter.

PETTYS: Yeah, he did. And I like to tell that story. And this owes an awful lot to Bill Shipp, as do many things. Bill Shipp had at the time written a column or some sort of article -- and Miller was governor at the time. But his column suggested that he was in perhaps very serious health problems -- health consequences -- because of prostate trouble. Well, you know, sometimes you've got to check these things out. So, I called up his press secretary and I told him what I was interested in finding out. And the press secretary groans, and I can hear that he already knows what Miller is going to say to him when he calls up Miller and says, "Boss, what about this?" He knows he's going to get an earful. And so, he's whining, "Oh, do I have to do this? I don't really want to do that. You don't want me to do that, do you?" "Yeah, I really do." So, he calls me back an hour or so later, and explains that he has had to listen to the riot act being read by the governor and that, "No, damnit. There's no truth to that story."

So, that's fine. I put it out of my mind. Move on to the next thing. And I have totally forgotten about it until maybe two weeks or so later. Now, at the time, you know, I'd get to the Capitol. I'd walk up past where the governor parks and over to the legislative office building, which is where the press offices are. And on this particular morning, Miller's car pulls in. You know, trooper driving him. And he hops out and he says, "Dick, come here." I'm thinking, you know, what is this? What does he want? What's the deal here? But of course, you know, you go, because you want to know what's the governor got on his mind that he's calling you? And I get up to him, and he says, "I hear you've been inquiring about my health?" I said, "Well, yes I have." And he said, "Well, I got something for you." And he reaches into the pocket of his coat and pulls something out in his hand, and he holds it up like this so I can't see what it is. He says, "Now hold out your hand." And I hold it out like I'm going to shake, and he says, "No, turn it up this way." And then he puts this object in my hand and he closes it into a fist. And he says, "Okay, now look at it." And I open it up. It's a rubber surgical glove. And he said, "Now, I hear you been asking about that Bill Shipp story about whether I have prostate trouble, and I'm not sure whether you believe what Rick Dent told you or not. But you can check for yourself if you want to. Or you can believe Rick Dent." So you know, the old Marine. Not averse to a little earthiness.

You know what? I've thought a lot about this over the last thirty-five years, especially in the last few months - as I look back. There are some real changes now in the Legislature and in the State House, compared to when I started years ago. And that's more than just the leisure suits we all used to wear in the '70s. God do they look awful now that I look back at them. But I am

trying to remember, but I don't believe that we ever saw but maybe a handful of lobbyists in the halls back in the '70s. The industry had not developed at that point. There were certainly people with influence, but they didn't have to be there. They would put in a call. They'd pick up the phone, call this, that, or the other person, and you really didn't see that -- what was it Roy Barnes said? The eel-skin briefcases and the shark-skin loafers? Whatever it was, you didn't see that. That has developed just over the years with what I think is an unfortunate growth in a sense of self-importance among legislators, who only in recent years have talked in terms of referring to each other as Mr. Chairman or Mr. So-and-so instead of "Hey, Bob" or "Hey, Sam" or whatever. And we've also lost the great nicknames that these folks used to have when they came up here. "Sloppy Floyd" is of course the classic. "Husky Odom," who was anything but husky if you recall. I don't think I'll mention Leonard Meadows' nickname, although we actually put it on the wire once. Should I mention it or not?

SHORT: Absolutely.

PETTYS: Well, it was "Nookie." Leonard "Nookie" Meadows, and had it printed in his -- what do you call it? -- the facebook form. Not the internet facebook, but the facebook for legislators. Yeah, and it meant exactly what everybody thought it meant. And we had some great nicknames.

And we had some great off-the-wall debates. And one that for some reason sticks in my mind had to do -- in the house -- with requiring low-flush toilets -- retro-fitting low-flush toilets in housing and so on. And this had got to be a big deal, far out of proportion to what the bill itself would have done. And there were people who were just -- and you know, it was a Democrat-controlled Legislature, but were just outraged at the assault on individual rights. And you had David Lucas getting up there, and I don't know why I remember it except it was just strange and bizarre and funny at the same time. And he was just thundering, "Why, if we do this, such-and-such will happen. We can't do this. Besides that, what if you had a double-load in the commode?" And then the whole place erupted in laughter at the absurd thought of that.

You're not seeing that anymore. In part because the Republicans -- when they got in -- decided that all this was frivolous and the people wanted to see the Legislature really hard at work. And so, there's been a shift there. At the same time, there's been an increase in the number of lobbyists. You see more ego on the part of people who've got a little bit of power, but not much. And it's not really as pleasant a place to work in as it once was. Now, that's not to say that there aren't some really good people here, and there are. There are people here -- a lot of them -- for the right reasons, and who really try to do good, and who really try to serve their constituents' interests. But it's different. And maybe I'm just growing old and getting crotchety in my old age, but by god, it was better in the old days. So, that's my sermon for the day.

SHORT: Let's take a minute to talk about the governors again. In 1994, when Zell Miller, after promising to serve only one term, decided to run for reelection.

PETTYS: He certainly did, and you know what? He got away with it. It was a story for a couple of days, and then afterwards it just kind of disappeared. Had he done less in his first term it probably would have been a bigger issue. But I mean, he had by this point gotten the HOPE Scholarship going and it was very good for him, because I think that that proved the thing that saved him in the reelection campaign. Cobb County vote came in and broke for him, or at least

it gave him enough votes to win over Guy Millner.

Guy really was a nice guy, I mean he really was. But he was just a terrible candidate, and I've talked to him about it since and he's acknowledged that. I was with him on a campaign swing one time down in Statesboro. It was a meet-and-greet early in the morning, very early. In fact, I think we had left in a bus from his campaign headquarters at about 2 a.m. to get down there for the breakfast meeting. And he was going around, gripping and grinning, and he was introduced to Coach Erk Russell, who of course everybody knew down there. But he gripped the wrong guy's hand, and said hello to the wrong guy. Now, the explanation that his handlers gave later was that Guy was multi-tasking, which is a unique kind of explanation. But they said that Guy really was acknowledging the presence of Erk Russell, while also, you know, greeting this other guy. So, that was kind of the thing that got him into trouble.

There also had been this big deal about the self-funded campaign. Of course, I think we had determined from public disclosure records that he had a net worth of 84 million dollars. But the calls had been coming out, "Okay, well Guy, show us what you earn, what you really earn, you know, how you got your money and what's it invested in." Well, I think, if I recall correctly, Guy had been anti-lottery and it turned out that he had actually had some investments in casinos. That was one thing we learned. But we didn't actually learn that until enough pressure had been brought on the campaign to open his tax records. So, they finally decided, okay, they're going to let reporters take a look at his tax returns for a period of about -- I forgot what it was -- two or three hours, and then they would be closed.

Probably the worst thing I ever did to anybody occurred right at this point. A group of us in the press corp had decided, "Okay, you know, we're not tax accountants, and these are going to be very sophisticated returns and we're only getting three hours to look at this? So, let's get together and get our employers to hire an accountant to go with us." So, we called up this guy and he agreed. So, we were all set. So as a matter of courtesy, I called up somebody on the Millner campaign and said, "Look, this is what we've decided to do. We just want to let you know." He said, "Absolutely not. Absolutely not. You can't do that. That's not what we want to do. We're not going to let you do that." And I thought for a little bit, and I said, "Okay, well here's what we're going to do. We're going to have the TV cameras. We're going to bring him. And we're going to alert the TV cameras and they're going to be there with the bat lights all on you, and you can turn him out. And by the way, he's black." Probably the worst thing I ever did to the guy, but by god, he got in. And he helped us find things, like that. And obviously the Republican candidate didn't want to be seen in the light of a turning away an accountant. But especially you know, given the sensitivities of African-Americans to Republicans in general, they didn't want to be seen in that light either.

SHORT: Either you told me or I read somewhere, but that campaign -- the 1994 race between Miller and Millner -- was your favorite.

PETTYS: Yeah, it was. It was. There was something just about every day. And with a candidate like Guy, there was always something that was going to come up that was different. And that's kind of the definition of what news is. It's what you don't expect. So that was a good campaign.

SHORT: Slowly but surely, the Republican Party has taken control of Georgia politics. After -- what? -- 138 years, the domination by Democrats has ended. What happened?

PETTYS: I think it was going that way anyway, but there were a number of things that kind of slowed it down. For one thing, Democrats in Georgia always created a firewall between themselves and the national party. And they did things that generally were fairly popular, HOPE Scholarship being a good example. What happened was kind of a perfect storm. In 2002 when Roy Barnes was seeking reelection, he had changed the flag, and I suspect the anger was less about the actual change itself than it was the way it was done. The change was suddenly brought up -- brought to the public's attention one day, and that same day he made a very unusual speech on the floor of the House. The bill passed to change the flag. The Senate held it over the weekend, but passed it; within a week there was a new flag up. And people did not have the chance to comment on it, they hadn't been asked what they thought about it. And you know what? It was a fairly ugly flag too. And I say jokingly sometimes that Roy Barnes was kicked out because he was color-blind, but there's a little bit of truth there too. But fundamentally they did not like the way it was done. It was the process. They weren't consulted, something was just sprung on them and they weren't asked. It was imperious.

And that wasn't the only time they thought they saw Roy being imperious. He made teachers the scapegoat for his A plus education reform bill, unnecessarily. The bill didn't need a scapegoat for them to pass it. They thought maybe they needed the extra insurance of having a villain to put up there and say, "Okay folks, teachers are the problem. Therefore, we have got to do this, that, and the other to fix it." They probably could have passed it in another way without doing it. It was kind of overkill.

And finally, during the campaign you would always hear comments from people about heavy-handed fundraising tactics from the Barnes campaign. Well, they raised about 22 million dollars. So, they had to get that fundraising machine going and apparently they did quite well. And amidst all that, you had Sonny Perdue running this very underrated, underfunded campaign with a fairly simple message, basically saying, "I am not Roy Barnes. I won't be Roy Barnes." And the people elected a non-Roy Barnes.

SHORT: When you look at the Roy Barnes term there, do you think that it was a failure?

PETTYS: Only in the sense that he didn't have enough time to bring the things that he was setting the groundwork for to fruition. You know, his transportation proposals -- he just didn't have time to get those implemented. He didn't have time to totally secure the homeowner's tax relief grants. They did last I think until last year, but ultimately they were going. And when you only serve one term and your successor is dedicated to undoing everything you did, it's just not going to be lasting. But of course he's running for reelection -- not for reelection, but he's running for another shot at the office this year. And of course, we can't see at this point how that's going to come out, but surely there would be some vindication for him if he is elected. And there will be some chagrin to Sonny if he's elected as well.

SHORT: But you do agree that we can speculate on whether or not he can reinvent himself?

PETTYS: Yeah, we can agree on that. And it looks like he's doing pretty well. There was a recent Rasmussen pole that indicated he is not as unpopular as the Republicans would have us believe, or would like for us to believe. And in fact, would be competitive with all of the

candidates that they potentially may put up. This is an interesting time in state history. I guess every time is interesting. I would love to have been a reporter during the Gene Talmadge/Ellis Arnall -- the three governors -- four governors' fight. What a wonderful time that would be. I've talked to folks who had seen Ellis Arnall set up in the -- I think he was set up in the rotunda. And there were some people up in the balcony overlooking the rotunda tossing firecrackers down there to spook him. What a great time that would have been. So, they've had a lot of good stuff before.

SHORT: You know, even the hog supper is not what it used to be.

PETTYS: I was there a few weeks ago at the latest rendition of that, and most of the people I did not recognize as being political people. There were a few, but there were so many others there you couldn't get to them. The food is still pretty good. One constant -- Tommy Irvin was there, and that's a good thing.

SHORT: Well, you've had a wonderful career. I know you're very happy that when you decided to retire, the General Assembly paid you the highest compliment that they possibly could by use of resolutions. I've read them. I agree with them. You were always good and fair and capable and a good writer. And I know you must have enjoyed your career.

PETTYS: That was an honor and it wasn't exactly what I started out to be, but it was quite a ride.

SHORT: Good.

PETTYS: Quite a ride. And I was privileged to watch some pretty good folks deal with some pretty hairy problems.

SHORT: Well, now that you're retired though, you haven't given up your ability to write.

PETTYS: I still do a little part-time work for an internet-based publication called *Insider Advantage*. It's run by Matt Towery, Chuck Clay, and Pierre Howard is part of that operation as well -- former lieutenant governor. Two Republicans, one Democrat.

SHORT: Now that you've mentioned Pierre, I'd like to ask you this question. He was a shoe-in for governor.

PETTYS: Yes, he was.

SHORT: What year was that?

PETTYS: That was '98.

SHORT: '98, yes.

PETTYS: Wasn't that it?

SHORT: The year Barnes was elected.

PETTYS: Right.

SHORT: He withdrew from the race. You, I'm sure, worked on that story. What happened?

PETTYS: What he said at the time is what I do believe. And that is that he and his wife had had trouble conceiving a child, as many people do, and that the child that they finally conceived was precious to him, was very young at the time, and he wanted to spend as much quality time with him as he could. Being governor would take him away from that opportunity. He walked away from almost a sure shot at being governor into the role of being a great parent. And you know, it's pretty hard to fault somebody for doing that.

SHORT: Dick, I want to thank you for being with us today on behalf of the Duckworth Library at Young Harris College and the Richard B. Russell Library at the University of Georgia.

PETTYS: It's been my pleasure.

SHORT: Thanks.

PETTYS: Thank you.