

Tom Buck interviewed by Bob Short
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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short, and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics, sponsored by Young Harris College and the Richard B. Russell Library at the University of Georgia. Our guest is Tom Buck, long-time Columbus lawyer and civic leader, who served 38

years in the Georgia General Assembly. Welcome, Tom.

TOM BUCK: Thank you, Bob. It's a pleasure to be with you.

SHORT: With your permission, we'd like to divide our conversation into three parts. First, your early life in Columbus. Then, your service in the Georgia General Assembly. And finally, life after politics. You were born right here in Columbus. I believe, right here in this very place we're sitting.

BUCK: Well, I was born on March 2, 1938, and my mother and father lived in this house. I grew up in this area. I went to grammar school about three blocks up the road. I got through grammar school. Went to Columbus High School, which is about three or four blocks from where we are. Graduated from high school in 1955. Went to Emory University and got a degree. I majored in political science. And I stayed on at Emory for another three years, and got my law degree. And fortunately, when I got out of law school, I had passed the bar. And so, I could come back to Columbus to pursue my dreams of practicing law. And I was very fortunate to get involved with a fine, fine law firm. And we had an excellent law practice, and it was well-known, not just in Columbus, but throughout the state of Georgia. And I started practicing law with them like I said in '62. '63 comes around and I have to go off to the military. So I go. Instead of being a JAG officer, I turned out being a combat medic and wound up at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas. But I was in the reserves, and you know, I had to continue to go to reserves meetings, you know, in the summer, usually for two weeks and then one weekend a month. And finally in 1966 was when I had the opportunity to get elected to the Georgia House.

SHORT: Right.

BUCK: But living in this area was quite an experience. I had a paper route that started up at the Warner grammar school and went all the way down past the Bradley Museum. And also, there was a grocery store up here about two blocks, and I sacked groceries on the weekends. And my father had instilled in me a strong work ethic, and he had a lot to do with my future and life and what I was doing. And I was fortunate enough to be able to go to law school and get my own profession, and not be involved with family businesses, because sometimes those are not very much fun. But the time of growing up in this area was fantastic. Now, when I moved here, my father still owned this place and it had been used as an insurance agent office. One time, somebody lived here. And then later on it became a decorator's office. And I moved out here probably about ten years ago or fifteen years ago and set up my own law practice here by myself. But it was the same house. And I was born at the City Hospital, but I was brought to this house to grow up.

SHORT: When did you first get interested in politics?

BUCK: Well, I guess you would say -- I don't know how to really say this -- at Emory University I ran for and got elected president of my freshman class. That was my first brush with politics as such. And you know, I had some friends that were lawyers here in Columbus that had served or were serving, and you hear these stories about the General Assembly and a little bit about the House and a little bit about the Senate. At that time in my life I was single, and this

was like in 1966. And a bunch of the younger lawyers used to get together downtown to their favorite pub and drink a few beers after work, and you know, get on with our business. Well, a good friend of mine -- a colleague of mine -- was Milton Jones, who was serving in the House. And I had grown up with Milton, I think he was a year or two ahead of me in grammar school and high school. His wife and I were in the same class in high school. Anyway, Milton comes in, and here are the guys sitting around. And he says, "We've got to find a candidate to run for the Georgia House. Representative Jack Brinkley is going to run for Congress. It's going to create an open seat, and we need to have some of our people in that seat. And I need somebody who can come up there and help me." And so we go around the room and everybody in the room -- there must have been a dozen of us -- said, "No, I can't do it. I've got two young children at home. Oh, I can't afford it. Oh, my job won't let me do this." And so it gets to me. And he says, "Buck, what about you?" And I said, "I don't know. I'd have to get permission from my bosses." Because I was not a partner, I was just a junior in the law firm. And so, I went back to the office and I talked to Mr. Howell Hollis, who had served in the State Senate, and told him what I'd like to do and what was going on politically in Columbus about Brinkley deciding to run for the United States' House of Representatives. And so, Mr. Hollis talked to the other partners in the firm, and we had a sizable firm up there. At the time there were about twelve or thirteen of us in that law firm. And the next morning, Mr. Hollis called me back and he said, "Well, I'm going to give you the green light. I've talked to all the partners, and they think it will be good for you and it will be good for our law practice." So that same morning after I got the green light, we had a press conference that afternoon. And this was in 1966, and we announced what we were going to do and qualified at the proper time and got elected. We did have opposition in that first term. But I got elected and was sworn in officially in January of 1967.

SHORT: Do you remember your first campaign?

BUCK: Yeah, at that time, you know, people didn't spend the money -- or as much money -- to run a campaign on as far as advertising and what not as they do today. In today's world, it's gotten where it's out of whack, in my personal opinion. We had at-large seats. At that time we had seven House members from Columbus and two state senators. And my district that I ran for and got elected was rather large. So, I had the whole county of Muscogee as a constituency. And then later, we get to reapportionment and what not, and we went to single-member districts. But I went in, as I said, and I had the whole county. So, my experience in the campaign -- I had a pretty good family name. The Buck family's always been very involved in civic affairs and supportive of things that have led to the betterment of this area. And I felt like it was something I could do to give back to the community, because they had been good to me and my father and my grandfather. So, I took it from there. And ultimately during the election, when I found out I had opposition, the fellow running against me qualified by petition. And I worked the whole county. I went everywhere. I went to residences and knocking on doors in subdivisions during the week. And on the weekends I might go knock on doors again and try to build up some sense of where people knew who I was and knew the name, knew the background and had confidence enough to elect me in that particular race. And that year, the Democratic Party in Georgia was a very, very conservative bunch, and very few Republican members in the House and the Senate. I got qualified, got elected, and stayed there 38 years. And my political philosophy always stayed the same from the day I started to the day I quit. I would probably classify it now as more of a Republican than a Democrat, but we ran and had a very successful

race. But with personal contacts -- I had very little advertising. I had some sign boards around town. I had a few bumper stickers and I maybe had an ad or two on the radio, maybe an ad or two on the TV. But it made me a better person to run for that large of a seat, because I got to know more people in this community. And fortunately, I met a lot of good people in this community, and they were very supportive and were supportive all the time I stayed up there.

SHORT: So, in 1967 you went to Atlanta to begin what turned out to be 38 years with the General Assembly. What was it like to be a freshman legislator?

BUCK: Well, I'll tell you this story. One of my partners in the law practice told me after I'd gotten elected. He said, "Son, when you go up there now." He said, "Keep your mouth shut. Listen, and make as many friends as you can." And I subscribed to that theory, and it paid dividends over the years. I think I've mentioned this before -- that in treating people -- regardless of race, color, or creed -- I had this philosophy. And I think it comes from my background growing up. I treated people like I wanted people to treat me, regardless of sex or political party or affiliation. And I made many, many friends over the period of time I was there. And I was very fortunate to kind of move up the ladder in a short period of time. I had a wonderful relationship with the late George L. Smith, who was speaker when I went there. And that time was a very historical time in the state of Georgia politically. The General Assembly had to elect a governor. The way the morning started, we were all sworn in, and then we had to elect a speaker and a speaker pro temp and what not -- a clerk. And this was when George L. got a group together, and we decided to divorce the House and the Senate from the direct control of the governor's office, which we did -- which I thought was a great, great thing for people really, because you had such a handful of people running state government before we divorced ourselves from the governor's office. It just kind of left a bad taste in your mouth. Well, anyway, on that first day -- the second Monday in January -- after we took the oath of office and after we elected the speakers and the speaker pro temps and what-not -- then we had a joint session with the Senate and a roll-call vote on who you wanted to vote for for governor. At that time, Lester Maddox and Howard "Bo" Callaway were the two candidates. Muskogee County had gone real strong for Bo Callaway. He was a Republican. Bo had been our congressman here in the Third District, and was well-known in this community and in the surrounding counties. And so, when the time came for roll call, I didn't have any choice other than to vote for -- I thought at that time -- Bo Callaway. And out of the delegation we had of seven House members and two senators here in Muskogee, we had one member that voted for Mr. Maddox, and the rest of us voted for Bo Callaway. I would say George Busbee voted for Bo Callaway, former Governor Busbee. And that was a very historical part of our history. And it was a new tone and a new day, the way that the General Assembly operated and worked. And my first few years, I was just pretty much trying to learn what to do and how to do and who to do. And it paid dividends. I would establish an excellent relationship with Speaker George L. Smith, who was speaker for several years until his death -- untimely death, I might say. And he kind of boosted my career up to the point where when he left us, I had a chairmanship of a standing House committee. I was on the Appropriations Committee, I was on the Rules Committee, and also a committee we used to call the Green Door Committee, which was a small group of inner sanctum that made a lot of policy. And so, I have to thank with deep affection my relationship with the then speaker. And of course, when he died, we had to elect a new speaker, which at that time, we all flew down to Swainsboro. I say we all did -- most of the members of the General Assembly either drove or

flew. I was fortunate. I got to fly. It was a big, big funeral. I'd been to Swainsboro before to play in a golf tournament down there, and had gotten to know George L. pretty well. But when he died, then the race was between Tom Murphy and George Busbee. And so, we get home from Swainsboro, and I get a call from Sloppy Floyd, who was the chairman of the Appropriations Committee in the House. And he came from Tron, Georgia, up in north Georgia. He was a great friend of the speaker's, and others there that were in leadership positions. I get this phone call from Sloppy Floyd, and he says, "Boys, a deal's been struck. George Busbee's going to run for governor, and Tom Murphy's going to support him in that endeavor. And Tom Murphy's going to run for speaker, and George Busbee's going to support him in that race." And so that's how we got home and we get this phone call. Well, I had known Mr. Murphy. I never really had much dealings with him at the time. At that time he was speaker pro temp. And my friends and I, we get on the phone and we call Mr. Murphy to congratulate him and tell him we were all for him. And tried to get in on the ground floor. And my relationship with Tom Murphy was excellent. He helped me in my whole career until he retired. And for some reason had some confidence in me, and put me in important places like George L. had. But living there without George L. and now having with Tom Murphy, I eventually served as chairman of the committee on higher education, which we called at that time the University System Committee. I served as chairman of the House Retirement Committee. Then I served as chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee for many, many years. And then finally, I served my last term as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. So, I had a pretty full schedule. And I never dreamed I would stay there that long. I thought maybe a couple of terms and that would be all I'd be interested in. And I wasn't married, though, so I could pretty much be away from home without disturbing the sanctity of a household. But later on in life, I did get married. And I don't mind telling you that I knew it was time to come home, because I was spending so much time in Atlanta away from Susan and my family here in Columbus, even though the legislature only meets 40 days. We used to say 40 days and 80 nights. But 40 days could sometimes extend into 60 days, you know, depending on recesses and what not. But I had a full, full career, and I made a lot of good friends.

SHORT: Let's back up a minute if you will to 1966 and the race for governor in which you had some pretty heavy candidates in the Democratic primary, which was finally won by Lester Maddox. And then you had the race between Maddox and a Republican named Bo Callaway. Did you have a favorite in that race?

BUCK: Well, I guess I had a favorite, and it was Bo Callaway, because I knew Mr. Callaway and what he had done in the past. I knew his family history. He had been a congressman in this area and so I had gotten to know him through that relationship. And so I guess, yes, I did. I don't think I was being disloyal -- somebody would say I was being disloyal to vote for the Republican and not the Democrat. I guess it got down to personalities and I was more impressed with Mr. Callaway and what he could do than I was Mr. Maddox. I always got along with Mr. Maddox. He was quite a character. And he always called me, "Iceman." He couldn't remember Tom Buck. But my family owned the Buck Ice and Coal Company, and he could remember that. So, Mr. Maddox, even after he went over and he was lieutenant governor, I'd see him around and he'd say, "How you doing, Iceman?" I'd say, "Fine, governor. Good to see you." So, I got along and respected him. I think Lester Maddox did an outstanding job as governor. A lot better than a lot of people thought he was going to do. He made some excellent

appointments to some positions that opened the doors for people that you wouldn't think Maddox would do from what you read in the newspaper. But he performed pretty well.

SHORT: Before we get too far down the line, I want to ask you about your relationship with Speaker Murphy.

BUCK: Well, Speaker Murphy, when he took over as speaker -- you know, the speaker usually has the authority to name committee chairs and what not. So, I was of course interested and hoping he was not going to do away with my job. And he called me one day and said, "Buck, I want you to take over the House Committee on Higher Education -- the University System." He said, "You know, we've had Chappelle Matthews here for a long time. Chappelle has left us, gone. And I want somebody that can run the committee, but also is not committed to the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech. I want somebody that's independent from those institutions." He said, "You got your law degree and former education at Emory University. So, I feel like you could do a job well done and still make sure that everybody was treated fairly." And I really enjoyed that chairmanship. You get to meet a lot of good people. We were dealing with presidents at the universities and colleges in Georgia, the Board of Regents, which is made up of some outstanding people. And over the years I got real involved in it. And then we put a new system in as far as financing higher education. And George Busbee was governor, and he put me on that commission, and we came back with a plan on how we were going to allocate funds for different categories and different institutions. And you know, I was happy as a pig in a slop with that. I got to go to all the football games and sit in the president's box. You know, it established a good relationship with a lot of people that work with the University System, and at Georgia Tech as well as the University of Georgia. That was a step up as far as I was concerned, I had a little bit more prestige than being the chairman of the Retirement Committee. And then one day, I get this phone call and it's Tom Murphy. And he just calls me 'Bucko.' "How you doing?" And I wasn't doing too well. I was sick, I think I had the flu. And he said, "The reason I'm calling is I want you to take over the chairmanship of the House Ways and Means Committee." And he said, "I know you, and I know how mean you can be." And he said, "You can be the one that doesn't have a problem with saying no to somebody, and that's what I need." And Bill Dover was the chairman at that time and he had resigned to take a job with the public service commission. And I said, "Well, Mr. Murphy, I appreciate this. It's quite flattering." But I said, "Can I let you know tomorrow? Can I sleep on it?" And I said, "I've never served on the Ways and Means." He said, "Alright." He said, "Sleep on it. Let me know something first thing in the morning, because I've got to make a decision. And don't tell anybody that I've called you about this." And I said, "No, sir." So, I got home that afternoon late. I got to thinking, well, Murphy had done a lot for me. And if he's asking me to do something for him, I've got to do it. So, I called him at home in Bremen. Got him on the phone. Told him I'd thought it out, and would be happy to take over that chairmanship. After which he said, "Well, I appreciate it. I've got to make some other changes. And I'll let you know when you can say something about this to the public." So, about two days went by, and he made the announcement. He moved Calvin Smyre, who was from Columbus, in as chair of higher education, and then he took somebody -- I can't remember -- it was somebody else. Calvin had a chairmanship of, I think, Industrial Relations at that time. He moved out of that, took over higher education, and Speaker Murphy put somebody else in for that committee at that time. It was quite an experience chairing that committee.

SHORT: Tell us about the committee and what you'd do -- what the committee did.

BUCK: Well, you know, under the Constitution of the state of Georgia, all of your bills that are introduced that affect revenue and taxes are assigned to the Ways and Means Committee. And so, you get a lot of visitors and a lobbyists coming in to see you about certain pieces of legislation and numbers. And what I did, as chairman I had a good staff that had worked in that committee, particularly a lady named Miny Sellers. She had been just working in that as not just a secretary, but you know, maybe a little more of a higher up job than that. But she probably knew more tax law related to Georgia than anybody else in the Capitol. And so, I had her to help me and show me around a little bit till I got where I was comfortable enough and felt like I could run the committee the way I wanted to run it. I didn't make a whole lot of changes, but we set up a subcommittee system where any legislation that was introduced that was referred to Ways and Means, I would set up three or four different subcommittees and I'd assign the legislation to those committees. Let them have full hearings -- public hearings -- on the issues, especially those that were complicated or controversial. Some of the legislation was easy, you know. We were very careful. We worked closely with the Revenue Department as to revenues and how they were coming in and from which source and what not. And it was an education itself to see how state government was being funded and how it was being paid for. It was hard work. And I guess I was able to do that without causing any problems. And I thank Tom Murphy for it -- for giving me the opportunity to do that. But I think on top of that the highest honor I ever received as far as being involved was being named as chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

SHORT: Yes.

BUCK: Which was a real interesting, and it was a full-time job. But I enjoyed it.

SHORT: Let's talk about that. The appropriations process in Georgia actually begins in the governor's office, is that not right?

BUCK: That's correct.

SHORT: With a budget estimate.

BUCK: That's right.

SHORT: Revenue estimate.

BUCK: Right.

SHORT: How does it go from there?

BUCK: Well, the governor's got floor leaders and what not in the House and in the Senate. And all revenue bills have to go through the Ways and Means Committee as far as any tax is concerned. But on Appropriations, the governor would introduce a bill. We normally had two bills on Appropriations. We had a supplemental appropriations bill, for which the fiscal year starts on July the 1, and expires on June the 30. Sometimes we had some things we'd want to

change. And so, we'd have a supplemental budget bill that we would address first. And that would go through the process of passing the House Appropriations Committee, going to the Senate for them to do whatever they want to it, getting back into what we call a conference committee, where there are three House members and three Senate members that deal with the differences between the two bodies as to what the final version of the budget's going to be. And then we pass that. And the next is the same process. We take up the next fiscal year's budget -- the big budget as we call it. And this was next, we'd have the governor come in and make a speech as to what he wanted and why he had proposed what he had and what not. And we'd have a department head from every branch of state government come into joint meetings with the Senate Appropriations Committee to talk about finances, taxes, appropriations, allocations, whatever. And then ultimately, the three House members and the three Senate members would agree on what we call a conference committee report. And then that report went to every senator and every House member and we'd take a vote, up or down, on whether or not to accept the conference committee report and let it become law, or whether we had to go back and negotiate some more. It took a lot of time. But it was also interesting too. You could see department heads come in that you never would see except maybe once a year. And it was important in representing your constituencies to be able on a constituent's call or problem they've got with the state for me to know somebody I could call in some department or some department head and say, "Hey, this is Tom Buck, and a constituent's got a problem. I wanted to see if you could give me some guidance or some help." And most of the time, the department head will reason you along with it, explain certain things that we as legislators didn't really know. But it was a full-time job. I mean, the legislature's set to go for 40 days. They always recess. This year they've recessed two or three times, because they're having a problem with reaching an agreement on the budget. And with the present economic status that we are in right now, I can understand. It's going to be tough on those guys to have to vote to -- hopefully not raise any new taxes -- but to cut areas that need to be cut for the time being, and still maintain state government at a good level, including education.

SHORT: You mentioned the Green Door Committee. Define that for us.

BUCK: Well, the Green Door Committee was not a real committee. The Green Door Committee was kind of what I'd like to look at -- and I say with affection -- the good ole' boys that were on the Green Door Committee would really make a lot of the decisions that would go directly to the speaker's office and also to the Rules Committee as far as what we wanted to do on this matter or that matter. It wasn't just confined to Appropriations or tax laws. And there were probably about ten to twelve of us on that. And we would meet behind a green door, as the media called it -- the Green Door. But it was really behind Tom Murphy's office in a conference room where we'd sit around a table, and I think he liked to call it the Policy Committee. It really wasn't a committee. But your leaders like your chairman of the Ways and Means, Appropriations, University System, and what not, would get together at the beck and call of the boss, who was Tom Murphy. And we'd sit there and go over certain things that we liked about what was going on here or what we'd better not do over there. And you could get a lot done with a smaller group. Even though it probably was not wide-open. You know, nobody could just walk in the green door room without permission.

SHORT: Right. You mentioned conference committees on the Appropriations bills, and

you served there. Tell us what happens in those negotiations.

BUCK: Well, what you find yourself in is the House has passed a bill on the budget. The Senate has passed a bill on the budget, which has its differences from the House position on certain matters. And it winds up where the Senate disagrees with the House bill and the House committee disagrees with the Senate bill, and so it goes into what's called a conference committee. And that means under the rules of the House or procedure and what not, the lieutenant governor appoints three senators, usually the chairman of the committee and two others, to the conference committee. And the speaker appoints three, and he usually appoints the chairman of the Appropriations Committee. And also Terry Coleman, who was a long-time member of the House, and Larry Walker. And I served on conference committees for I guess 25, 28 years, I was on budget conference committees, which was quite interesting. It was a very powerful position to be in. You could do some things for some folks that normally nobody else could do, like getting some funds for a certain project in Columbus, Georgia.

SHORT: Earmarks.

BUCK: Yeah, yeah, earmarks. And which I don't know whether that's a good idea now or not, but it was an honor to serve on that and be involved in it. And the whole time I was there, Terry Coleman was on the conference committee, and Larry Walker and me. And the way I was put on was because Bubba MacDonald, who had been chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, decided he wanted to run for governor. And so, there was a vacancy there as far as that position was concerned. So, Tom Murphy appointed me to take Bubba's place on the conference committee. You know, you had your supplemental conference committee and your regular budget conference committee. It also taught you a lot about where the money's going and who's spending money and what they're spending it for, whether it be DOT or -- you know, certain money's already dedicated to DOT -- Department of Transportation. The Revenue Department over here, Corrections over here. Let's see -- University System -- who's getting what? Even though the University System under the Board of Regents has got the final say-so on how they're going to spend the money that's appropriated. But it was kind of a high-profile position.

SHORT: How long does it take to negotiate a final budget?

BUCK: Well, when your financial situation is in good shape -- meaning the economy, like it was up until about three years ago, and just started going downhill -- it's pretty easy, because you had excess funding and no problems. And we tried to be responsible but also accommodate the things that we felt like needed to be funded or more funded or what not. Now, on the other hand, when you find yourself in a position like we're in now -- the budget cuts are going to affect higher education, they're going to affect public education, school teachers, state employees, public safety, you name it -- even DOT. Although one thing that concerns me a lot, I've always been pro-law enforcement or pro-public safety. My whole legislative career, I believed strongly in maintaining the Department of Public Safety at its highest level. Now, they're in the process of having to take cuts and cut back on what they're doing, which affects the safety of the public down the road. And I know they're trying to do the best they can with what they've got, but you know, some things I think are more important than other things are. What I

think is important maybe you don't think so -- you might think something else. But that's human, there's nothing wrong with that. But I'm just hoping personally that in the next couple of years that things are going to get back to where they used to be. And if they do, we can come back or they can come back and address some of these cuts problems that they're going through now. It's not a fun time to be in the Georgia General Assembly under these circumstances where you've got to say no to a lot of people and a lot of these people you're saying no to are friends. And you know, you just can't do it. And hopefully, the general public and the voters understand, you know, that if you don't have it, you can't pay for it. Because we have to live under what we call a 'balanced budget.' We can't go in debt -- or we sell bonds or something like that. It's real tight right now.

SHORT: Everybody's talking taxes.

BUCK: Yeah.

SHORT: Does Georgia's tax system need overhauling?

BUCK: Well, I'm sure that we probably could create a special committee to study and come back with some recommendations. I'm sure there are some things that have been on the books for a long time that probably need to be reexamined or examined to see if they're fulfilling the purposes of why it was put on and what it's generating, or what it would do if you eliminated that program and put another program over here. So, your tax situation -- not a lot of people understand that. It's no reflection on anybody's integrity or intelligence, but you know, you take an average legislator, and unless they've spent some time, he or she does not know that much about the tax structure in the state of Georgia or the budget process. So, it's probably something that they might ought to take a look at. Now, I've seen in the news media these last several months since the General Assembly was in session, that things have been imposed and some tax increases in this area and some decreases over here and what not. It's not the best time in the world for the state of Georgia as far as the financial situation.

SHORT: I don't think people understand that when the budget goes up, you know, revenues must increase or you've got to cut the budget.

BUCK: That's right.

SHORT: One of the two. And it's difficult. You can't give tax breaks in periods where that's the case, like it is today. I guess one response might be a more efficient government, but that too is a can of worms.

BUCK: Well, you know, in the past I think Governor Perdue's created some type of commission to go in and look at the tax structure in Georgia and come back to recommend to his office what changes they think could be done or should be done. We changed a few things. And trying to eliminate waste in government, so to speak. Paying for things we really don't need to be paying for. Doing things we don't really need to be doing. That's something that, you know, sounds good. Let's take a look at it. It's something that really ought to be looked at, or at least every five years or so. Maybe every ten years. But in good times, you don't think too much about

that, and only when we go through hard times like we're going through now.

SHORT: I don't think we think either, Tom, about what the loss of jobs and that part of the economy -- what effect that has on us, because 45 percent of our annual revenue is from income taxes. And the other, I think that's about 35 percent, is from sales' tax.

BUCK: Sales' tax.

SHORT: You aren't making money, and you aren't spending money. And that certainly is going to affect your revenue stream.

BUCK: Absolutely. Absolutely.

SHORT: Good. I think that history would require me to ask you about the great feud between our friend, Speaker Murphy, and our friend, Lieutenant Governor Miller.

BUCK: Well, I sensed that you would bring that up. It was one of those days that the legislature was in session. The House side finished its business for the day. The Senate was still in session. And the good ole' boys were back behind the Green Door, and Speaker Murphy had summoned us to talk about the supplemental budget and the conference committee report. Reminding, you know, that the conference committee was made up of three senators and three House members. They had a position on certain items in the budget, and we had one. And we were trying to resolve these differences, and it's kind of like a dog and pony show, you go in and you meet -- public meeting, what not. You go through things, and eventually you get down to where you've not got much left to do but to put it to bed and adopt it. And on this particular occasion, Tom Murphy and myself and Larry Walker and Terry Coleman and, I think, maybe Bill Lee, were sitting back in Speaker Murphy's conference room. And he brings up, "Well, boys, tell us what's going on with the budget? What's going on with the conference committee?" And Terry was chairman of the Appropriations Committee, so he was a spokesman. And he said, "Well, Mr. Speaker, we've got several items that we want that they won't let us have, and we've got several items that they want and we won't let them have. But if we can agree on some certain things, we'll give some and they'll give some. We can wrap this thing up." And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what fellows, let's go over and see the lieutenant governor and see if we can talk to him about this thing." And so, bear in mind that Speaker Murphy was not particularly fond of Lieutenant Governor Pierre Howard, and Pierre Howard was not particularly fond of Speaker Murphy. So, we go over there, and the Senate's still in session. We go in on the side door and side room, and we walk down in front and stand by the podium and the lieutenant governor is presiding. And he let's us sit there, more because of Murphy than anything else, and let's him cool his heels for about 15 minutes before he comes over to the end of the podium and says, "Yes sir, Mr. Speaker, what can I do for you?" And so, Murphy says, "Well, Lieutenant Governor, we're trying to get this thing resolved. We've gotten this far. We've got very little left to do, but your people want this and our people want that. And it's a stalemate. But if we can give you some things and you can give us some things then we can put this thing to bed." And Lieutenant Governor Howard looked at Murphy and said, "Well, I'm sorry Mr. Speaker. I can't do that." And with that, Murphy said, "Well, I tell you what, Governor, you can just 'KMA'. Come on boys, let's go." And we were like little ducks walking out of the Senate chamber back

over to Murphy's office. But anyway, it got resolved in the next couple of days, and we were on to something else. But that was a funny thing that happened.

SHORT: You knew Tom Murphy probably as well as anybody. Did you find him as tough and insensitive as the media tried to make him out to be?

BUCK: No. No, the media tried to make him look like a redneck lawyer from the country. And the redneck lawyer from the country was plenty smart. I think Tom Murphy did more for the state of Georgia than anybody I know of in his time that he was there. And he was hard-nosed, but he also had a strong religious background where he was good to people and wanted to help people less fortunate. And you could see this good side in Tom Murphy. I could, because I was around him a lot. But the media wouldn't pay any attention to it. There were a lot of things that he did for this state that would not be here today if it hadn't been for Tom Murphy, like the Georgia Dome and several facilities -- Turner Field -- you know, some of these other big things that didn't do anything to help him in his legislative district, but it helped the state of Georgia. And he had this ability to work well with people, as far as race or gender. And if you noticed, when he was speaker, he had pretty much stacked the deck as far as having certain people from urban areas involved in his committee process, and on the opposite, certain people from the rural areas, certain situations with the black community and the white community, and the rich and the poor. In my opinion, he was unduly crucified by the media, but we got to accept it. And he got to accept it, and just didn't worry about it, because he was fair and square to everybody. I mean, even the opposition party, in my opinion, he was always fair to them. And he could be a very gentle person.

SHORT: Were you surprised when he was defeated in -- what? -- 2002, after 28 years as speaker?

BUCK: I was kind of surprised, but when you look at senators, and you see where the districts were redrawn, which we are obligated to do by law every ten years, that Murphy's district didn't look like the district -- he was going to have a hard time getting reelected. And he could have put a stop to that if he wanted to. He could have put anything in that reapportionment bill that related to his seat that would make him be favorable rather than not favorable, because he was the boss. He was the boss man, and he was going to say, "Alright, I want this, this, and this, and y'all argue over the rest of it." And you say, "Yes sir, Mr. Speaker, that's fine with us." Of course, we were all kind of looking after each other as to where the incumbent is and where he's going to be under this new plan. But it wasn't a real shock to me, no, that he got defeated. I had an occasion to visit with him several times after he was defeated, and he came to the Capitol and we'd see him and visit with him. And of course, when he expired, you know, we were all involved in being a part of the -- I want to say the funeral, but it wasn't necessarily the funeral -- but it was a day of honoring Tom Murphy in the House. And we had several people there that made speeches about him. It was a sad day to see Murphy go. And you know, he died. And I think had he still been running the show, so to speak, he'd still be with us today. But he wouldn't want to not be here and be involved. And so maybe he's happy that he's gone to glory. Had an occasion a couple of weeks ago, they had a portrait unveiling of Tom Murphy in the Georgia House. And they invited some of us older fellows that had been there in his group to come up and sit. And it was nice seeing some of Speaker Murphy's relatives, you know, his

granddaughters and grandsons and sons and his daughter's sons and grandchildren. And it made you just think about the old man. You know, you can just look at him and start thinking about things that he had been involved in as far as I was concerned or something. He had helped me with a project for Columbus or what not.

SHORT: What do you remember most about him?

BUCK: Well, I guess one of the things that I'll always remember is the cigar and the Stetson hat. In fact, you know, he didn't smoke the cigar. He chewed on cigars, and so did Bill Lee at that time. And they would always steal cigars from each other. But he would chomp on that cigar and finally get it down to just a butt, and he'd throw it away and get another one and just start "cha cha cha" -- chewing on it. And then when he'd come into the Capitol in the morning -- he always got there about 8 o'clock -- it was of course in January and the weather was cold, he'd have a top coat on -- an overcoat -- and he had his big Stetson cowboy hat on. And he would put that thing on and keep it on until he got to his office, and take his hat off and put it on the chair. And I was thinking about that the other day, when I was going through a closet of mine at home. Tom Murphy gave me one of those Stetson hats one time, and he gave Crawford Ware, who was a long-time legislator from up in Hogansville. So, Crawford and I had two Tom Murphy hats, you know. And I'm not a hat man, never have been really a hat man. I wear a cap playing golf. But you know, that's something that I remember about him that will always stay in the back of my mind. Not this, that, or the other, but this was just a little levity. And you could tell when you asked him a question, and he'd put that cigar in and chomp on it for a few minutes before he'd give you an answer -- now, he was thinking the whole time he was chewing. But he loved his good cigar.

SHORT: Did you ever have breakfast with Marcus?

BUCK: Used to go over to Marcus' about --

SHORT: That's Marcus Collins.

BUCK: Marcus Collins, former member of the House, chairman of Ways and Means, and later Revenue Commissioner. He and Speaker Murphy were very close friends. I'd say they were probably closer than anybody over there. And they had this tradition where somebody would have a breakfast meeting every morning in a hotel room, and you'd come in there and eat some eggs with warm toast and cake and coffee or orange juice or what not. And they had it every morning -- Monday through Friday. And you had to be invited to go, and I was always invited. And they had it at the old Marriott Hotel, which I stayed at for 20 years and then moved up to the new Marriott, and stayed up there another 20 years. It was on the way to the Capitol. I'd just drive up, park, and go in and shoot the bull and you'd see all kinds of funny people, good people. And Murphy would always come in, you know, have a cup of coffee and talk to the guys that were in the room before he'd leave to go to the Capitol. It was kind of a traditional thing. But I would try to get over there at least twice a week. I always went to the Capitol, but they'd have that thing set up where you could go at 6:30 in the morning. I always tried to be at the Capitol my whole career at 7 o'clock in the morning. I could get more work done, especially when I had Ways and Means and Appropriations. I could get more work done between 7 o'clock and 9

o'clock than I could the rest of the day, because my time was moved to doing other things. And so, you could go by there, maybe get some feeling about what the topic of the day was going to be or what had happened the day before. Marcus was in charge of the food, and Murphy would come in, of course, and everybody would kiss the ring. And it was just a good way to start the day off, to come in there and see these guys. I've been thinking about a lot of the older members that are no longer there would come by. But you were invited to come, you could not just drop in on your own.

SHORT: You served with seven governors.

BUCK: Yes, I'm afraid so.

SHORT: Let's talk about some of them. What was your impression -- we've talked about Lester Maddox, who had no governmental experience, who knew very few members of the legislature, who knew none of the department heads -- agency heads. How would you rate his administration?

BUCK: You know, Lester, we know him with his Pickrick restaurant and his axe handles and showmanship -- like riding a bicycle backwards. But Lester really was a better governor than most people give him credit for. And I say that in that he was painted a racist, but he really wasn't. And he made some outstanding appointments to positions that he had the authority to appoint. And some of his appointments were excellent and not what you would think that he would do, on courts -- Court of Appeals, Supreme Court, Board of Regents -- things like that. He was kind of a showman, you know. Like I told you earlier, he called me "Iceman." We had one member in our delegation that voted for him, and he was the man that had to go to the governor for Columbus, Georgia. Tom Buck couldn't do anything, because Tom Buck voted for Bo Callaway. And so anyway, he had some real good staff around him. And you know, he was not a bad governor at all. I think each governor I served under had different -- of course, you and I have different personalities. But I never did get very close to Lester. I never got close to President Carter, even though he's right down the road in Plains. I got along super well with Joe Frank Harris. Now, he was Murphy's boy, and Joe Frank would pretty much walk the line on what Murphy wanted to do.

SHORT: You served with Busbee.

BUCK: Busbee was one of my favorites. At that time, I had known Busbee in the House. He'd been majority leader, I'd been involved in leadership. And I just had this great feeling for him. Easy to get to -- I mean, not "get to" but to get in to see and talk about things. And just a hale fellow well met. And for example, if I wanted to go see the governor, I didn't have to go through the governor's outer office, I could go around the back way and come there and slip in and talk to George whenever I wanted to. And it was just the same way with him. And I thought so much of him. He was good to us as a delegation, and good to Muscogee County. And then the other one that I feel real strong about was Roy Barnes. And Roy was an outstanding governor, and quite frankly, he deserved a second term. But Roy's biggest mistake is he was trying to do too many things too quick. If you look back on the race for governor when he lost to Sonny Perdue, our present governor -- if you look back on it, he could have withheld or taken out the

bill to change the Georgia flag, and put it over for his next term. He could have done some other things, delayed things. It wouldn't be so controversial that it would get him in the posture where he got beat. But I had the same kind of relationship with Roy as I did with George Busbee. I could get in to see him anytime I wanted to through the back door. And that made you feel good, you could do stuff like that. And I don't think Sonny has done a real bad job as governor, he's inherited some problems that he can't do anything about. But he's a little bit different than Roy was and the others. I remember when Jimmy Carter got -- time for him to step aside. I went by his office on the second floor to go outside where they were going to have the inaugural services for governor. And there wasn't a soul in there. Jimmy Carter was sitting in his office by himself. And I went over to speak to him, tell him I enjoyed serving under him, and wish him the very best in the future. But he didn't have anybody with him. Just lonesome in there waiting to go out and turn the keys of state government over to somebody.

SHORT: Tom, in 2004, you decided to step down as the senior member of the House with 38 consecutive years in office. Why did you decide to hang it up?

BUCK: Well, there were several reasons, but one thing, I just did not like the way things were going at the State House. I was still a conservative Democrat. The Republicans were making strides, and eventually you could see that they were going to take over the House and the Senate and government. And I just didn't want to be involved in all that unpleasantness. And also, I had been there so long, it was kind of like -- my wife and I have been married about 17 years. And I was never at home and it just takes a lot of dedication for somebody to stay in public service that long and maintain a good relationship at home with family, wife, children, step-children, grandchildren. And I fortunately have married a very fine lady, and she enjoyed my being in the General Assembly up to a point. But I could always see -- the session would always start in January, when I'd leave to go to Atlanta on that Sunday before the Monday, she had a smile on her face, and she'd say, "Oh, have a good trip sweetheart. I'll see you." Then, about a month would go by, and then that little smile started disappearing on Sundays when I'd leave to go back. And then towards the end, she had her lip out. So, that was a small consideration. But really, I felt like I needed to be at home more than I was. And I was tired of it, and I could see it was going to be very unpleasant with the way things were going. And I had been -- still am a conservative Democrat. The Republican Party -- the governor even called and said, "We want you to consider changing parties. And if you'll run as a Republican, we'll guarantee that you stay as chair of Appropriations and Rules and where you are." Which was, you know, something to think about. Well, I got to thinking about that, and then I felt like, "Well, if I switch parties, I'd have to resign my chairmanship as chairman of Appropriations." Either I'd probably get fired, or -- but Terry Coleman and I were real good friends, and have been since he came. I used to be called the baby chairman -- I was the youngest chairman. And then Terry got appointed to a chairmanship and he was the new baby chairman. And so, I talked it over with the family, and I talked it over with several good, close friends, and I felt like, you know, you've fought a good fight, you've done a good job, these things. You've made your contribution to society, and you have paid back the community for all the good things the community's done for you. There's just numerous reasons. And I talked to my dad, and he said, "Well, son, maybe you ought to think about retiring." And 38 years, and a lot of my buddies were gone, you know. I've lived a wonderful life, and still hope I'll have years ahead of me to enjoy. And like I told you earlier, some of the greatest people I've ever known, I met through the

Georgia General Assembly and been a member thereof. It was a tough decision, but I think in the long run, I went out on top. I was in the State Capitol yesterday, and I bet you half a dozen legislators and came up and said, "We sure wish you were back here running the Appropriations Committee. We think we could get things resolved." I said, "Well, I miss y'all, but I don't miss being involved." I don't have any regrets on looking back. We've got a good delegation from Muscogee County, and I'm fortunate to have a wonderful relationship with all of them. And we have always maintained our longevity. I mean, you know, Calvin Smyre is from Muscogee and he's been in the House probably about 34 years. We've got Carolyn Hugley, she's a leader in the Democratic caucus. She's been there about 10 or 15 years. We've always had people that stay there. And you know, the longer you stay, you're either going to move up the ladder or you ain't going to get reelected. So anyway, I don't have any regrets.

SHORT: As you look back over your career, is there anything you might have done differently?

BUCK: Gosh, I would imagine there are a dozen things I'd have done differently. But without having given it any thought, I can't think of anything off the top of my head. But allow me to comment on some things. I was very lucky to be where I was. I think I was somewhat effective when I was in positions to be effective in. But I don't miss all the fussing and fighting. I told Terry Coleman this one time, you know, the Republican Party would have a caucus about once a week, and the Democratic Party would have a caucus about once a week. And we'd go across the street -- not to the Underground, but over behind the Presbyterian Church. I can't remember what we used to call that place. But anyway, we'd have these meetings over there. And I went to Terry Coleman, and I said, "Boss, I love you like a brother." I said, "But I ain't going to anymore of these Democratic caucus meetings unless you make me go." And he said, "Why?" I said, "All you do is sit up there and listen to people argue with each other." I said, "I don't have time for that." And he said, "Well, if I need you, I'll call you." I said, "Well, you do that and I'll come running." And so, Terry could see what was coming. Larry Walker could see what was coming. Jimmy Skipper, a lot of those that had been there for a long time, you could see there was going to be a change. Unfortunately, those that now have the power, I don't think know how to use it. It takes a little time, of course. For example, this situation that developed recently with having to have a new speaker in the middle of a term -- that's not good. I think David Ralston is very qualified and is going to do a good job as speaker, but it seems to me that they haven't really been able to put their act together like they should.

SHORT: What has life been like since you left the General Assembly?

BUCK: Well, life's been good. You know, we're having this meeting today in my office, but it used to be where I lived when I was born. And my father left us about two years ago. He and I were very close. My mother left us about twelve years ago. And I had two brothers younger than I, but they have passed and gone to glory. But I've got some step-sons and step-grandsons that live here -- three boys. I've had a close relationship with them. I stay busy volunteering on several boards, like the Springer Opera House, which we named the State Theatre of Georgia. And the River Center for the Arts, I'm on that Board. St. Francis Hospital, I'm on their Board. Several others -- a naval museum down on the river. So, I have those kinds of meetings. I will soon be the next chair of the Board of Trustees at St. Francis Hospital, which will be very

demanding. It's already demanding as vice-chair. But I volunteer to do that, and that keeps me busy. But most of all, when the weather is right, my golf group gets together, usually on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. And I've got a condominium that I fortunately have had for 18 to 19 years as St. Simons Island at The King and Prince. So, Susan and I get to go down there a lot. And we'll go down and stay five or six days and come home and go back down or what not, and have friends come down and spend the weekend with us. So, I stay pretty busy. I still get up early every morning, and I'm downtown at the coffee shop at about seven. And I sit there and read the paper. We don't get the Atlanta paper here anymore, I miss that. But I read the paper, and we've got a diverse group. My pastor comes. And we got some law enforcement people come, the sheriff comes. Several of the guys will just sit there and shoot the bull and talk about what happened the day before, what's going to happen tomorrow, and read the paper again. And it takes about an hour to get started. Then I go to my daddy's office. Then I come here, after I've gone to the post office downtown. So, I take care of my all my business between 8 o'clock and 11 o'clock. And I go to church every Sunday. Sunday school every Sunday. I've got a full life.

SHORT: Finally, this question. How would you like to be remembered?

BUCK: Well, I would like to be remembered as somebody who made a contribution to the betterment of humanity as far as Georgia's concerned. I would like to be remembered as somebody that was dedicated and a hard worker in a position, such as being an elected official. And I would like to be remembered as somebody that had a very good work ethic. I also enjoy a reputation of being fair and square and honest. Several things I would like to be remembered for. And honestly, I'd like to be remembered as somebody that the people -- my constituents -- had a lot of confidence in me and my ability, and have given me the privilege to serve for 38 years. So, I guess that pretty much covers all that.

SHORT: Well, you certainly have earned that reputation.

BUCK: Well, you're kind. You're kind.

SHORT: I want to thank you, Tom Buck, on behalf of Young Harris College and the Richard B. Russell Library at the University of Georgia.

BUCK: Well, it's been a real pleasure for me to see you Bob. I hadn't seen you in several years. But we've known each other for a long time, and I'm honored that you would ask me to be a part of this program. And I look forward to seeing it.

