

Interview with Ken Coon, Republican candidate for governor, Conway, Arkansas, June 10, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter De Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: -- you've got no experience in political science and your background is--

Coon: That's right. Only one course. I'm a biologist. I got involved out of civil involvement and. . .

J.B.: And through the jaycee's.

Coon: And through the jaycee's.

J.B.: Were you state jaycee president?

Coon: Uhuh. Right after Pritckett. Well, we've got a brand new president right now and he's the third one since I was.

J.B.: You're how old?

Coon: 38. Will be 39 in October. I actually had to file before my year was up, which is pretty risky. Because you're not supposed to get involved in politics in the jaycee's. But I had a good record and established myself as someone not to exploit. And I had a statement, maybe that big, in the Gazette. And I never did anything else until I was out of office and back from the national convention in July.

Walter De Vries: Had you done anything politically before 1972?

Coon: Never. Drove a few yard signs for Dale Bumpers. That's all.

W.D.V.: That was it.

Coon: Uhuh.

W.D.V.: So you're one of the really few post-Rockefeller Republican leaders.

Coon: Never was that at all. Just heard them talking about. . .

W.D.V.: Is there anybody else like you?

Coon: The people I've recruited since then. I've recruited about. . . well, we're divided up into 16 regions, the party is, and I've recruited either what is the now regional chairman or will be in our next elections. They are the field men, really. That's their role. Volunteer field men. And some others at county levels.

W.D.V.: So the regions are between the state and the county organization.

Coon: Uhuh. We've got regions, Congressional districts and the state. ~~Six~~ Fifteen, four and one.

J.B.: You ran for lieutenant governor, right?

Coon: Uhuh. Got 38% of the vote and \$39,000 and a lot of shoe leather.

W.D.V.: So it was a pretty good return.

Coon: Yeah, it was a pretty good return. I got [13/14%] more than the gubernatorial candidate got. And nobody took note of it.

J.B.: Why did you decide to get into politics? And why as a Republican?

Coon: Oh, I decided to get involved in politics because when I was dealing with my experience in jaycee's I saw that the people that get involved. . . . I'm prettymuch altruistic about this whole thing. It gets me in trouble a lot with the pros, with the people who've been in it for a long time. Their motives and mine are totally different. But I just felt like you ought to get involved. Just that simple. I went and travelled and made a lot of speeches and believe what I've said. Just bailed off. . . I didn't do any of the things you're supposed to do. I didn't have anybody lined up or any support. I just started from scratch. Went and borrowed on my teacher's. . . at the teachers' credit union and rented a headquarters and just started making phone calls and putting together an organization and raising money.

J.B.: What were you saying? You said you believed in what you were saying.

Coon: About involvement, about concern. I think that's what's wrong. I think that 90% of people in politics have the wrong motives. They're either trying to feed their ego or trying to make a buck. There was a time when I was motivated by that, but I got involved in jaycee's and I just liked working with people. I worked with one on one. And I've never been able to translate this. It's frustrating to me. I've worked with chapters where they would. . . . Well, let's start with individuals. I've worked with individuals that were just totally turned around. They would start to be able to give a speech, start to get organized, start to get involved in their community. Whereas before maybe they were sitting home watching tv. I've seen that happen to individuals and I've seen chapters do the same thing and I've seen them turn towns around, especially small towns. And I just felt like if I was able to do that then that's what we needed in politics. But I'd be the first to admit that I've had a lot of frustrations trying to do it that way.

J.B.: Why did you get involved in the Republican party politics when you got involved in politics? You said you had worked in Bumpers' campaign, right?

Coon: Yeah, because I'm individually. . . individual's responsible oriented. I don't believe in group answers to problems. I just don't believe money answers the problems. I think the key to all our problems is in the individual development of our people. That they themselves are the only ones that can solve their problems. And I haven't been able to get very far with that, either, because you know our politics is one of promising. When you start talking in terms of individuals

themselves, you're in trouble, really, as far as getting votes. I think that's what's caused our trouble and caused our drift. Shoot, man, I'm in a minority. I guarantee you, when I got in this business. A lot of the people who've been in it a long time think I'm some kind of a nut because I think people will get involved just because they care about people. But I know they will because I came from a population of people who do that. Hell, I've seen guys go in debt \$2,000 because they were state vice president and they travelled 150-160 nights. And the most they could gain out of it was a certificate or plaque. But that force you don't find in politics.

J.B.: You said you recruited the leadership for all of the regions.

Coon: They're my ex-jaycee friends. See, I'm over the hill now by two years. I've been out about two years but my peers, a lot of my peers, got involved with me.

J.B.: So the basic leadership group in the Republican party in Arkansas would have to be young men who came out of the jaycees.

Coon: Yeah, except it's a dichotomous situation. We've still got the old group, too. And we probably were on a collision course.

W.D.V.: Now by the old group you mean the people before Rockefeller?

Coon: I mean the people who were there even before Rockefeller and those that he brought and those that got involved from a different, they were coming from some other direction than the jaycee thing. Maybe they just liked politics and some of them are very good people. But had I not been pulled out of what I was doing to be a candidate, I think that I would have been able in time to reform it. But now all those people are looking at my candidacy. They're working for me. Well, the thinking was that the best thing we could do for the party with me running was to win. So that the party effort would become my

effort. It would become one in the same. And that's happened to a degree, but not totally. But hell, I went to Ft Smith this weekend and got on the phones and signed up 158 volunteers just calling people and asking them if they wanted to help. But the Republican party, they don't do things like that. They're an inturned, entrenched group. They don't know how to recruit. They're too partisan. They're looking at things like patronage and trips to Washington and getting to meet the vice president and stuff like that. It doesn't attract me at all. If I thought I could do something for Conway, then that would matter to me. But. . . it's hard to explain. My objective is not even to be governor. It's to serve people. If being governor fits in that, fine; if it don't, fine. I was a college teacher before hand and may be afterwards.

J.B.: You taught where?

Coon: West Ark Community College over in Ft Smith.

J.B.: Are you a native of Arkansas?

Coon: No. North Louisiana. Not that much difference, really. I've been here ten years and I've only been in this thing two years. Not quite two years. In July it will be two years. So I don't have that much of a public image yet. In fact a lot of people don't even know I'm from Louisiana. I don't know what my name recognition is. We haven't been able to afford any polls. 232,000 people voted for me last time. I know when we started it was like 6%. I think it ended up in the 60s.

J.B.: Where do you see the Republican party heading in Arkansas?

Coon: Well, that's hard to answer. If the people that I recruited and I walked away from it today, I think it would go back to the post office Republican level where it was. Of course it's not going to go back as low as it was, but it's amazing that somebody like Winthrop

Rockefeller could get in there for what, ten years, and spend \$40 million and not be able to see that many traces of it.

W.D.V.: Why is that true? With all that money and all that they put into it, how come it's no different now, in terms of the number of office holders you have--one in the house and one in the senate--

Coon: Because they didn't try to build.

W.D.V.: What was wrong?

Coon: I wasn't there.

W.D.V.: But from looking back on it and from what you hear.

Coon: They didn't make any attempt to build a party. They just. . . I guess, it was just a matter of serving as governor. I don't know. Look to me like they could look down the road and see that--

W.D.V.: How could they spend all that money and be around that long and not have any tangible results?

Coon: I can't understand it. If I could just have one million of that, of those dollars, I think I could win. Not only that, I think I could put the party together. But I have recruited more people, by myself, in the fifteen months I was executive director than everybody else put together. And it's just because I asked.

W.D.V.: You mean the old post office Republican party of the '50s remained the same way right through the '60s and right into the '70s? Never really changed?

Coon: If you put it on a scale of 100 it may have picked up a few points. And then it was. . . if it was on a graph, from there to 51, 52%, whatever we won with, it was an artificial thing. And it went right back. Not as low, but close. But even last year. . . it was our best year we've had raising money.

W.D.V.: As a party?

Coon: Yeah.

J.B.: How do you raise it?

Coon: We just ask people. We had a golden [tusk?] situation where we asked people to pay \$500. We were successful on that. We had near 50 members on that. We had a tremendously successful fundraiser with Secretary Butz. \$100 a head. We sold 270 tickets. I went around speaking and adding drafts, pledges. It was stuff that you have to. . . it has to have a constant input. If you stop, it'll stop.

J.B.: How many candidates do you have running for the legislature this year?

Coon: Eight. That was done on purpose. We targeted. We selected eight, that could have won if we'd of followed through and given them the budget they should have had. They were every one picked in Republican areas and they were everyone good candidates. But you see, the impetus is gone. I'm out of there. I was going to actually monitor those campaigns, help them organize. We were going to train the campaign managers. Show them their organizational charts, management by objective, and priorities. How to do all that. And none of that's coming through now.

J.B.: Why did you decide to run?

Coon: I had to. Wasn't anybody left. National committeemen just came to me and said "You've got to run. If you don't, we're going down the tube."

J.B.: Who is the national committeeman?

Coon: Odel Patter [?]. Weston, of course he complicated the hell out of things. Nobody wanted him to be the nominee. He would have embarrassed us. He knew nobody in the party. All of a sudden he just started making noise. And still nobody knew him. He used to be in the press everyday; nobody knew him. And on filing day he showed up at headquarters

and filed.

J.B.: This is. . . what's his name?

Coon: Weston. Joe Harry or Harry Joe Weston.

J.B.: So did you get in because he got in and you felt you had to have someone--

Coon: Well, that was one of the factors. Nobody wanted him to be the nominee. But nobody wanted us to have a token, again, either. It's a paradox. The regulars, the people don't want to do anything that's embarrassing. They want to keep on looking like they're strong. And yet you're not going to be able to build until you admit that you're not strong and go back at step one and start over. Like the targeting. They didn't want to admit that. The press came to us and said "What the hell's going on? You got no candidates." And they just. . . well, first they tried to hide it. Later on they say "Well, this is the way we planned it." Of course we never had but two or three more than we got now. I think we had three in the house and I don't know how many we had in the senate.

W.D.V.: Why is that? It appears that Arkansas, the Republican party in terms of fielding candidates and so on is about the weakest in the South.

Coon: Well, it's hard for me to answer that in the past. Right now it's just that. . . . It hasn't got anything to do with politics. It's just that people don't want to join losers. They do what's socially acceptable. We had a county chairman file as a Democrat. I called him up and said "What's going on?" He said "I want to win." They just don't have any courage. The people will just do whatever is socially acceptable in their home town so when they go for coffee they won't get killed. That's how damn shallow it is.

J.B.: Is there registration by party in Arkansas?

Coon: No. No. But all of us got right around 40% last time. So it's not that bad, really.

W.D.V.: But you have been unable to field candidates in a lot of the legislative races.

Coon: Right. However last time we had 100 and some odd candidates across the board and every one of them got beat. We had a lot of [counties/candidates?] represented, but not for senator. And us. A good many county offices. In '70 they had a heck of a lot of candidates.

W.D.V.: They still got beat.

Coon: They still got beat. When Rockefeller got beat they got beat.

W.D.V.: How do you explain that?

Coon: Well, there was a lot of fear of Rockefeller. People, I think, had the feeling that he was. . . the carpetbagger thing was there and money. They feared money. A lot of the same things that attracted people to him were also feared. And as soon as they got a chance to vote for a moderate Democrat that looked good, they did. The situation's totally changed now from what it was. Rockefeller got beat by Faubus in '64. And then I guess Faubus saw the handwriting on the wall and he didn't run in '66. But one of the machine types did. And Rockefeller beat him. And then in '68 another segregationist old guard type ran and he beat him. And then in '70 the Democrats sort of reformed themselves and that's how Dale Bumpers got in. He was young, looked good, sounded good, and he just got everybody excited by his race. Money wise, he didn't have any money compared to Rockefeller. But he really. . . . It was almost like in a vacuum. Just sucked him in there.

W.D.V.: But four years of Republican control of the state house still

hadn't helped strengthen the Republican party.

Coon: We didn't have control of the state house. You mean. . .

W.D.V.: I mean control of the governor's office.

Coon: It did not build a party. I don't even know if that was one of their goals. It could/^{not}have been or they would have made some progress toward it. But those four years were the most progressive years Arkansas has ever had. Turned the state around. Really started us moving in a lot of areas.

W.D.V.: It turned the state around, but did not turn the party around.

Coon: And Bumpers came in with the good judgement. . . All he did was pass all of Rockefeller's programs. Just slick. Passed every one of them. Kindergarten, free text books. All the stuff that Rockefeller had paid for the research for and brought in experts. Reorganized state government from 65 departments to 13. All those things. And the election system's cleaner. Shoot. . . from what they tell me you couldn't get your votes counted back there before. . . . They sued people right and left. They spent money on suits. No telling how much money. But they cleaned up the election system where you can get the votes counted. See, that corruption with it's imprint isn't there any more. That motivation's gone. You take away that motivation and take away the money and then you're in a bad. . . .

W.D.V.: So the four years of Rockefeller had an effect of cleaning up the Democratic party.

Coon: Exactly.

W.D.V.: And making it stronger.

Coon: In a way it was self defeating.

W.D.V.: Because they're in at least a strong a position as they were before that time, before Rockefeller.

Coon: Yeah, but cleaner.

W.D.V.: Cleaner, that's what I. . .

Coon: More progressive. All those who defected, went back. All the businessmen and the educated people in the mainstream that voted for Rockefeller came back when they had a chance to vote for a moderate Democrat. That's what I'm up against with Pryor. Because he looks like. . . not as good as Dale Bumpers, but similar. And my whole thrust is that he represents the machine. They're coming back. And they are. They're all behind him. See, they were out of office for eight years. The head of Ark Gas, the head of Murphy Oil and all those guys. They were out of office for eight years. And now they've gotten behind Pryor solid. In fact they almost picked him as the candidate when Faubus wouldn't stay hid. Since they changed off of him and got on to Pryor he caused all kind of stink, but he didn't cause enough to beat him. Because his own credibility was lacking. But he's got all the old guard behind him, Pryor has. Plus labor. And how in the world that's going to hold together I don't know. But I don't know what's going to happen to the party, I really don't. There just not a lot of people in it that understand about hard work. They don't really want to be organized. They don't want fixed goals. I think in their own frame of reference and in their own minds, they're doing a good job. I think they're sincere. But they're just not willing to do what you got to do to win when you're in the kind of up hill situation we are. It can be done.

W.D.V.: But there's no state wide leadership to do it?

Coon: Huhuh. I'm the closest thing to it and I'm kind of almost reluctant because of some of the reasons I pointed out to you earlier. I kind of feel like I'm out of place. I'd rather be back on the campus or

in some other movement really getting something done. You don't have to put up with all the b.s. you have to put up with in politics. So. . .

W.D.V.: You don't see any developing. . . leadership developing?

Coon: Yep, this crew that I've recruited. But it's got me out there in a situation where I've almost got to keep on going.

W.D.V.: Are they going to stay in if you. . . .?

Coon: No way. That's my feeling. That may be . . .

J.B.: Let's assume for a moment that you lose. Which you admit is at least a probability.

Coon: Then I've got a big decision to make. That's what I told these guys. I said "It would be different if you were asking me for two years, but you're asking me for the rest of my life." And they said "What do you mean?" I said "Well, hell, if I get 40% of above, I'm the leader of the party."

W.D.V.: That's right.

Coon: Right? And they said yes. So what have I got to do from there? I've got to become state chairman. I've got to keep on with what we've built. And then next time I've got to run again. And the next time I've got to run again, or get somebody else to. The thrust has, I mean it's got to keep on going or it just doesn't make any sense. And maybe if I were a little more positive about it and really believed that I could change politics then maybe I would be willing to dedicate the rest of my life to it. That's what you're talking about. At 39 years old, it would take me as long as it took David Train to win. And then I would serve for several years. And you know what that kind of life does to you. Burning candle at both ends. And I've been doing it since '67. On civil work or politics. And frankly I'm a little bit tired. I wouldn't be if I knew I was doing good, but there's. . . . You work,

you work, you work and then you see the thing going right back where it was. Course I've never been in the leadership position in the party. I was number two during this period of time. And boy let me tell you it was hard for me to serve there, too. It really was. I understand what executive director is supposed to do. But with no leadership at the top it was really difficult.

J.B.: Has there been an absence of leadership since Rockefeller's left or died?

Coon: I think there's been an absense of real leadership the whole time. I really do. You had things there like you could never get anywhere else. Like the money and the name and the power. And those things meant a lot. He could go and recruit somebody where I would have to go at them from a totally different direction. Or he could ask the powers that be in the business community to buy a \$100 ticket and they'd buy it. Just because they didn't want to tell him no. We don't have that now. We're coming at them now from below.

J.B.: Where does ^{John Paul} [Rockefeller] fit into the scheme of things?

Coon: He acts to me like he's not interested at all. He's afraid somebody's going to try to capture him and use him politically.

J.B.: That letter he wrote and appeared in the Republican party newsletter, newspaper, after his father died, suggested that he saw some role for himself in helping to build or continue to build a Republican party in Arkansas. Has there been any follow up on that?

Coon: No. Not that I can discern now.

J.B.: Well you'd be in a better position to discern than anyone else, wouldn't you?

Coon: Not really, not really. See I've never been accepted among some

of the old guard in the party as far as the . . . discussions. There is still a lot of whispering that goes around. If I call [Win-Paul] and ask him to do something, three more people might call him and try to undo it. So you really don't know what they're doing.

W.D.V.: How is. . . . Go ahead.

Coon: Well. . . I'm still looked upon as young and aggressive and really naive and a hard worker. I think they're very schizophrenic when it comes to me. They know they've got to have this or something like this and yet they fear it.

J.B.: Has the Republican party in Arkansas reverted back to being a patronage party?

Coon: Well, they couldn't. The post office is gone. The way I understand it you had people who just kept those positions so they could name people when we had a president in the White House. But you don't have that anymore. All we do now is recommend people for assessors or appraisers for the VA or a few people for the FHA. The only thing you name any more that's got any real clout is [ASCS] state committee. There's five of those. But you know, I was executive director for 15 months and didn't have much stuff come through us.

W.D.V.: Who did it go through?

Coon: Oh, John Paul. It comes through us, and we have our say, but I think when it all shakes down that's probably 10% of the decision.

J.B.: So Hammerschmidt really is a key figure in determining patronage related to Arkansas.

Coon: Uhuh. And he's not that party oriented.

W.D.V.: I was going to ask you, what has he done to help build up the state party?

Coon: 'cause he's stronger than it is.

And that's the danger that you have with candidates. They're candidate oriented, not party oriented. Same thing apparently Doug Yarr [?] did. It's the same thing I'm doing. You almost have to. I don't know how you get around it.

J.B.: Are the people you brought into the party pretty much people out of jaycee backgrounds and experience? Are many of them willing to run as candidates?

Coon: You bet!

J.B.: Why aren't they filing?

Coon: Because they're helping me.

J.B.: Will they be running in the future?

Coon: Uhuh.

J.B.: For what? This fall election?

Coon: All levels.

W.D.V.: With or without you?

Coon: I don't know. I think it depends on how far they got themselves committed before I got out.

W.D.V.: But it was you that brought them in. Is it going to be you that keeps them in?

Coon: Until they've been in long enough to get their feet on the ground, make their own decisions whether they want to stay or not. They came because I asked them. And that's all the reason they came. But now whether they will stay or not. . . . Now like up in northwest Arkansas there's one example of a young man up there that has gotten in real good with the party. And he's a Republican anyway and was before I asked him. See, some of these fellows were already Republicans that I recruited. Some were not. I think he would stay. Now there's some down in southeast Arkansas that I don't think they'd stay if I left. See,

we're kind of in a McGovern squeeze on this thing because the old guard's got the money. The guys I'm recruiting don't have anything but their hands and their energy. It's not that much money.

J.B.: What do you mean when you say the McGovern squeeze?

Coon: Well, you know, he ran off [all day a month?] and he couldn't get elected. He got all the troops in there, but he couldn't get any money. Course he got some before it was over with, but all the big givers were on Nixon's side. Course Watergate's changed a lot of that, too.

J.B.: What do you think the effect of Watergate is?

Coon: I think you got more people involved, more small givers involved. The influence of the big givers has been diluted. They won't give, for one reason. They're not giving.

J.B.: Has it had any effect on recruiting?

Coon: No. People recruit people. You don't recruit the causes. And that's what I couldn't get these people to understand. When you get ready to sell a ticket, the only thing that counts in the relationship between the seller and the buyer. Now you're not going to sit down there and say "Now do I want to hear Secretary Butz or do I want to hear Ronald Reagan?" He responds to you asking him. If you've got enough self-discipline to ask 100 people, then 60 will buy. See, they couldn't buy all that. That's too modern. That's sales techniques. That's modern management. That's things they don't understand. They say "No, if we get Percy, nobody'll buy a ticket." I just couldn't convince them.

J.B.: You're saying then that the old guard is basically ideological.

Coon: Ideological and very superstition about knowing how to do things politically. They don't have that much respect for goals for pert charts for polls. We didn't even have goals. It took me a year

to get them to sit down and say "What are we here for? What do we want to do?" To finally come up with a plan of action. And then they passed it more out of getting it out of the way than. . . . They didn't commit to it. Even when they bought it, they didn't commit to it. They just don't operate like that.

W.D.V.: When you say they are you referring to the executive committee, or the state committee or the whole state committee, or what?

Coon: Executive committee, those that have been in a long time; state committee; candidate committee.

W.D.V.: Are those committees more than paper organizations?

Coon: No sir, they're paper. That's all they are. You don't have one county committee in Arkansas that's doing what they ought to be doing. You got maybe 25 meeting. And the rest of them, all you got it somebody on election commission.

W.D.V.: Are any of the counties staffed?

Coon: No way.

W.D.V.: State central is the only place that's staffed.

Coon: Right.

J.B.: How much staff is there?

Coon: Well, it varies. We've got right now an assistant director that's acting in my place. One secretary and one secretary part time, the bookkeeper, a student research director and kind of a field man.

W.D.V.: Is that way down from what it was four years ago?

Coon: Under WR? Oh yeah. Twenty something people. Way down.

W.D.V.: Do you get a good deal of your revenues with the filing fees?

Coon: No. We got \$8,000 this year out of a proposed budget of \$200,000.

J.B.: [Unclear.]

Coon: Do we, uhuh.

J.B.: And the party puts on the primary?

Coon: Uhhuh. Of course we don't like. . . we try to avoid competition in it so it doesn't cost too much. Weston caused us to have a primary. We didn't have any on any other level. Governor and lieutenant governor was only place we had any competition.

J.B.: So how much does it cost you to put on a primary or do you use volunteers?

Coon: We use mostly volunteers. The printing bill I think was \$4000.

J.B.: Do you have to man every precinct in the state?

Coon: Oh no. We had one box in most counties.

W.D.V.: For the whole county?

Coon: Uhhuh.

J.B.: Is there any mechanism to prevent a person from voting in both primaries?

Coon: Just other than the fact that people know it and if they get caught it's against the law. If you're a visible Republican you couldn't get away with it. I'm sure there are a lot of bolters that do. Maybe not. . . they wouldn't vote for both the same day both primaries.

But they'd vote in the Republican primary and in the run off they've vote in the Democratic primary. Of course we had a. . . . One of the county chairman in Pulaski county put the Bumpers-Fulbright race on our ballots. Just. . . and some more questions, like on impeachment, that sort of thing. . . just to see what would happen. And the Republicans voted the same ratio for Bumpers as the Democrats did.

J.B.: That was in effect just a straw ballot type thing. I mean, the vote wasn't counted

Coon: Wasn't counted. But it meant that the Republicans who went and voted in the Democratic, weren't necessarily swinging one way or the

other. They were voting the same way, same ratio that the Democrats. . . .

W.D.V.: Can the county chairman just do that unilaterally, where ever he wants to on the ballot?

Coon: He caught some flack over it in the press, but he did it.

W.D.V.: In other words, the state committee doesn't decide what's going to be on the ballot? Who decides what's going to be on the ballot?

Coon: Well, we decided the candidates that's going to be on the ballot. But nobody questions it if you put some things on the ballot in addition to that.

W.D.V.: So you can do that?

Coon: He did it. Nothing in the rules say you can't.

J.B.: Besides the Fulbright and Bumpers race, what else did he put on it?

Coon: Oh, he put on impeachment and some local questions.

J.B.: What happened on impeachment?

Coon: Most of them wanted him to stay. He had resignation, impeachment and stay in office. Most wanted him to stay. I don't remember the exact numbers.

W.D.V.: What has to be done to build the Republican party in Arkansas?

Coon: Well, I'm prejudiced and I would probably build it different from anybody else. But if I were going to build it I would start out just recruiting one on one, recruiting and organizing. The guys that wouldn't work, I'd ask them to resign. Old guys that just, all they're going to do is just shoot the breeze and go to the coffee shop and go to the election commissioner, I'd just get them out of there. They don't want to do anything. And three-fourths of them like that. You get somebody in that's willing to work The fact that the Republican

part is not being built is not because people of Arkansas don't want it to be. It's not their fault. It's ours. If we'd organize and work and produce some results, they'd elect us just like that. [Snaps figures together.] Sure, there's a voter attitude for the Democrats, but if you produce, they'll elect you. Hell, I carried a county up there that's nothing but a Democratic county. But my people worked. I didn't carry but three counties. One of them you could expect me to carry because it's my home county. The other you could expect me to carry because it is a Republican machine county. The only one in the state. But the third county was carried just because my organization worked. And if they'd of worked like that in every county we'd of carried the whole state.

J.B.: Which is the county that is the Republican machine county?

Coon: Which county? Searcy county. Spelled Searcy, but it's pronounced Sircy.

W.D.V.: Would registration by party help?

Coon: It would if you had Republican, Democrat and Independent. But if it forced them to get one way or the other it wouldn't help because they'd all be Democrat. The states that have that, do they have an independent category?

W.D.V.: Yes, have independent in some and no party. You can register as no party.

Coon: It would help in that it would give us our, identify our people. See, we don't even have our people identified. I. . . our mailing list. . . our supporters' list is 13,000 worn out people. But we tried to get them direct mail thing. That was one of the new things that I got us into. But when the first mailer didn't pay off, they bailed out. Even though half the cost was one time cost. Geared up cost. And the reason

it didn't pay off was it didn't go out on time. Which wasn't our fault. The chairman. . . he couldn't believe that the letter should be four pages. He was disagreeing with what's his name in Washington that does the Reader's Digest--Whince.

But I think it would have succeeded if it had gone out in January. Went out in April, right at tax time. And the curves tell you, the charts tell you on money raising that the best date's January 15. And after that it just goes down. It's progressively worse. In fact I think they cut it in half every month. R&C's got some figures on it. But, see, just another example of what I mean. You don't build a finance program in six months. But because it wasn't paying off. . . . They [let] the finance director go; got out of it. And it's a chicken and egg situation everywhere you turn. And I frankly don't think it can be solved unless you've just got totally new leadership.

W.D.V.: But you don't see that coming right now, unless this group--

Coon: It could come, it could come if I would become state chairman.

But I don't know if I want to pay that price. I really don't.

J.B.: You would almost have to become a full time paid state chairman, wouldn't you?

W.D.V.: Yeah, there is a movement. They're ready to do that. But, see, then I'm right back to fighting the budget thing, keeping the door open and recruiting. Well there's several fronts you've got to move on at once. And every one of those is chicken and egg. You've got to keep up your PR. You've got to raise your money and keep your doors open. You've got to communicate with your organization. You've got to do your research. You're got to recruit candidates. And it's almost like you've got to take a \$100,000 a year organization and just put it there, sit it in there and let it run long enough to see whether or not you can do

these things. But, as soon as you get in there and get going, first thing you know payroll's not [in?]. So you react to that. Then you're not getting any press. So you react to that. Then no candidates want to run so you react to that. And you just end up reacting all the time and come up with nothing. Because nobody is willing to say "Okay, let's wipe the slate clean. We'll start back and we'll start with priority county number one and we'll work on it until we get it organized and then we'll go to two." They'll say "Oh no, can't do that. We've got to keep our [building?]. If we close our building, they'll think we're dead." \$6,000/^{a month}keeping that damn building [with no one to staff it?].

It's not a political problem. It's a management problem. It really is.

W.D.V.: Is there any philosophical or ideological split in the party?

Coon: No.

W.D.V.: Like between conservative or moderate?

Coon: No.

W.D.V.: You don't think the party's becoming more conservative since Rockefeller's days?

Coon: Uhhuh, yeah, it's conservative. . . it's a moderate to conservative party with [a strength in the liberals?].

W.D.V.: But is it moving in any direction?

Coon: Yeah, it's moving backwards, right? I think most have realized that we can't afford the black vote. You know, that it was pretty well. . . .

W.D.V.: Well, you had most of it in 1970.

Coon: Had it all.

W.D.V.: And you lost it?

Coon: That coalition. They all went back, yeah. When I say that. . . we didn't have the ability to analyze it. I'm just telling you that

intuitively. But yeah, it went back. Most of our--

W.D.V.: But you haven't done any research on that? Or any polls?

Coon: Huhuh. I've done some. . . not thorough research, but I looked at some precincts that I knew to be almost totally black and looked at the percentages there. I think about a dozen of them.

W.D.V.: So that coalition is now gone?

Coon: Yeah.

W.D.V.: The coalition would have been moderate Democrats and blacks.

Coon: Uhhuh, and Republicans.

W.D.V.: That kept Winthrop in there for two terms and then he lost that in '70 to Bumpers. And that's now a permanent shift back the other way.

Coon: Uhhuh.

J.B.: What he lost was the moderate white Democrats.

Coon: That's right. And the blacks.

J.B.: No, he kept the blacks.

Coon: Yeah, he kept the blacks.

J.B.: Yeah, but I was saying, in '70, Rockefeller lost the moderate white Democrats.

W.D.V.: The Democrats for Rockefeller.

J.B.: But he kept the blacks.

W.D.V.: And lost them in '72.

Coon: Uhhuh. Well, he didn't run in '72.

J.B.: The Republicans, then, lost them in '72.

W.D.V.: That's what I meant.

Coon: Uhhuh. But we picked up a lot of conservative, more conservative blacks.

W.D.V.: Do you see the parties realigning on that basis?

Coon: Uhhuh. I think they should.

W.D.V.: The more conservative Democrats moving into the Republican. . .

Coon: Voting with us, not moving in.

W.D.V.: Well they're doing that at the presidential level, obviously.

Coon: Yeah, no doubt about that. If we hadn't had the Watergate, I think the South would have flipped over. I really think we would have seen--

W.D.V.: You think the impact was that great?

Coon: Yeah I do. I really do. Because. . . and this was one of the things that really attracted me. Take eight more years of Nixon and eight more years of Republican. . . which I think we would have had and they probably still will have unless they come up with somebody better than Kennedy. And McClellan's age and Fulbright's age and Mills' age. I mean it was just in the books, almost. It was there. Because what was holding us in the Democrat column was those guys' seniority. And their clout. You take them away, just like Mississippi. Mississippi's elected a Dem-- Republican Congressman.

W.D.V.: But you think Watergate stopped that?

Coon: Oh, yeah. Sure did. It gave people something to complain about, gripe about. Gave the Republicans something to sit down about and not keep going. Complain, not give money. I think that's the real motivation for keeping the Watergate thing going. They saw what it's doing.

W.D.V.: Well then, that set the Republican party back a great deal in this state.

Coon: Oh yeah. It did everywhere, I think. Because it's also going to undo some of the social programs. Which kind of fits with that. And turn it back to the right. And I think now he can't do that so they're keeping him off balance. Oh yea, that thing made one heck of a difference. No doubt about that. But it can be overcome on individual cases.

If people would work. But they're mostly not. Most of them not. They'd rather talk or argue. Tell you what, I've got a hell of a decision to make when this thing is over with. And I'm not looking forward to it.

W.D.V.: It's already partially made, isn't it?

Coon: Well. . .

W.D.V.: You're going to have to unmake it.

[End of side of tape.]

Coon: Even though there's nothing to it.

W.D.V.: You've done it in what, two years? You've come from the Bumpers campaign to executive director and then candidate for governor in what, about two years, three years?

Coon: Two years.

W.D.V.: Two years. Fifteen months.

Coon: I didn't do nothing for Bumpers but nail up a few yard signs.

W.D.V.: But isn't that atypical?

Coon: Yeah, it's atypical. But I'm atypical and that may be part of my problem. Maybe I should have joined common cause instead of. . . .

Of course I'm not philosophically minded. But you know, something like that rather than an ongoing party.

W.D.V.: Did you think when you started this that you'd be propelled from where you were to candidate for governor in 15 months?

Coon: Seems like I needed to solve the lack of leadership, yeah.

W.D.V.: I mean, is it that big a vacuum that--

Coon: Uhuh. Now I'm talking about some of my good friends. I mean good friends, that I really respect, but that just don't have the ability to put it together. They just don't. They won't work. They'll go to the cocktail parties in Washington. That's the difference in Democrat and Republican. Man, they're enthusiastic about it. They work. They'll

go day and night. But our people will say "Well, hell, I can't drive all the way to Little Rock to a meeting." Or "I can't. . . ." Somebody got mad at me the other day for calling them at 11:30 at night. I mean I was just getting started. When else are you supposed to call when the WATS line is busy all day. They just don't understand that. And they just won't work. They'd rather argue. That's what they spend their time doing. We can go to a meeting and sit there for five hours and nothing come out of it. Remind me of some of the teachers' committees. . . .

J.B.: How do you explain the difference between the development of the Republican party in Tennessee and in Arkansas?

Coon: Calibre of the candidates in Tennessee. If you can bring Wendell [?] over here and do it just like that tomorrow [snapped fingers.] Bill Brock. Howard Baker. Shoot. Those folks are good folks. They would have won no matter what they'd been labelled. They did it with. . . . Visited with some of the other states. I don't know how Oklahoma did it. I don't know their situation. But Tennessee did it with candidate improvement. I think Texas is making their progress in fundraising. I don't know what Oklahoma. . . they're making progress. . . everybody around us is making progress.

J.B.: How about Louisiana?

Coon: Well, they might be next to us. Next to the bottom, next to us. Course I think Mississippi organization, Clarke Reed, he's a strong individual. And it's a life time commitment with him. He's been in the thing 100 years.

J.B.: About 15, I think.

Coon: He just hangs in there. He loves it. Of course he's got the time and the money and the ability. Oh, it can be done and there's no doubt about it. But the question is, who's going to do it? Who's

willing to do it? We don't have anybody. . . . Even our top leaders now are not people that can leave their jobs that much. They have to go and make a living. They maybe can give you \$500,000 but even they can't put the time in it that some in the past have.

J.B.: If the Republican party at the moment is not a winning party in Arkansas, do you see it remaining an active, viable force that will serve as the loyal opposition to keep an eye on the Democrats?

Coon: We're not serving as it now. Dale did some work out here and he said he couldn't tell who the Republicans were in the house and senate. We don't have any programs that are different. We don't have our own program. We don't offer a program.

J.B.: What difference would it make to Arkansas. . . if you got elected governor. . . if you as a Republican--I'm emphasizing Republican--

Coon: If I got elected governor what difference would it make to Arkansas?

J.B.: Yeah, if you as a Republican got elected governor.

Coon: Difference in what? Calibre of the administration?

J.B.: What difference would it make to the state of Arkansas?

Coon: I think the state of Arkansas would continue on it's progressive trend it's been on the last eight years. I think that Pryor, his administration would be similar in that he would be influenced by the old guard. He would be influenced by the power politicians in Arkansas because they're behind him. Consequently I think I would have a more progressive administration. I think that direction would be maintained. To the party, I would build a party. Ain't no doubt about it. They might not like the way I would build it, but I'd build it.

J.B.: How would you do it?

Coon: I'd just tell counties to either. . . . I'd make them a check list

which I've already got. A management type thing. Regular meetings, meet your budget, put out your newsletters, involve your people in community projects. And if you didn't do that, don't even call. Until you cross this threshold of activity, don't even call me. There won't be any

. You've got to do your part before I'm going to do mine. Be that simple. I'd just call them together and say this is it. "You know, I'm the governor. But if you don't do your part and we don't build this party, we don't get our goals and motives straight here, I ain't. . . . You know, I won't even answer the phone. You can forget it." And I'd go to the people who elected me--which ain't going to be the Republicans, by the way. The people who are going to work and elect me are my personal friends. Some of them are Republicans; most of them are not. But I don't think that they are that concerned about philosophy. They're more concerned about good government. I know that's a worn out cliché, but they are concerned about that.

J.B.: Do you think that's what Bumpers basically represented to most people in Arkansas: good government?

Coon: Uhuh. Honest concern, good government. It's simple and I don't know why people can't understand it. You can't beat it with power; you can't beat it with money. And yet there's people right now that will get mad at me when I praise Bumpers in my talks. They'll say "You can't do that." Why can't I? He had a good administration. He carried on Rockefeller's programs. The record shows it. They spent there's no telling how much money and couldn't beat him. When you start out with 2% name recognition and they ain't yet to figure out how he put it together.

J.B.: How did you get attracted to Bumpers' campaign?

Coon: Met him at a state jaycee meeting.

J.B.: Was he in the jaycee's then or was he just a candidate?

Coon: No, he was a candidate. Came in over at the hospitality

J.B.: What was it about him that impressed you?

Coon: Ah, just a sharp guy. Knows how to meet people. Remembers your name. Just the basics. And later on some of his people called me and asked me to put out some yard signs and I did.

W.D.V.: What are his weaknesses?

Coon: Bumpers' weaknesses? I don't know that he has any. Of course the bit about his not being definitive about his stands is the greatest supposed weakness, but it ain't a weakness yet. It hasn't proved a weakness yet. I guess that's the only near one that he has. But I'm in a difficult position because I have a tendency to want to be that way but I can't do that against Pryor, because he's going to do that. He's already occupied that ground on me. And he's the front runner.

W.D.V.: We've heard that Pryor's strength in the Democratic primary was soft in that it was more of a anti-Faubus or anti-old Democratic organization--

Coon: That's true, that's true. I run into it every day. But that just means you have a chance, it don't mean you do it. You've got to match that with, you know, an aggressive candidacy. The organization, the money. Sure the opportunity's there. To take advantage of that opportunity is a whole nother thing. Pryor could be beat. I could beat Pryor if I could get the money. Get him on tv. Could possibly, very, very easily. Cause he is, he's a soft kind of guy. And he's got a record that's not a good one. He was in 12 years. . . and I think he had two or three bills in the US Congress and about three in the state. He's got the labor record. He's got some vulnerable stands on amnesty and gun control. And now the machine's behind him. So he's

vulnerable. My campaign manager, when he just looks at him as a candidate, he just gets all excited. Jumps up and down.

W.D.V.: Wouldn't Faubus have been easier?

Coon: He would have been easier on the short run, yeah. In this race. I think it would be better in the long run for the good of the party if we have a polar situation. If we have a liberal. Which Pryor is. But the funny thing about it, the business community doesn't recognize him as that. They're behind him just like he was. . . . Of course Dale Bumpers was pretty liberal, too. That doesn't show as much on the state level. It's not as important at the state level as being a good administrator and being honest. Getting out and with the people. But you guys could help me by. . . just, frankly. . . I don't know what to do. And like you say, in a way I'm already partially committed.

W.D.V.: I think your problem is going to be to unmake--

[Interruption on tape.]

Coon: they ignored it.

J.B.: Why is it that you say you can't run as a Republican and get elected in Arkansas and yet Nixon gets 70 plus percent of the vote?

Coon: That was an anti vote. Anti-McGovern vote.

J.B.: What will happen in the next presidential election?

Coon: If you have Kennedy they'll go Republican again. But this is a conservative state but they prefer Democrats. Conservative Democrats.

J.B.: Well you had Faubus running against Pryor. Wasn't Faubus perceived as the more conservative?

Coon: Yeah, he was, but he was also perceived as governor twelve years and a bad record. I mean, you know, you've got a lot of conflicting things, conflicting variables. If I had the money to paint David

Pryor as the liberal that he is .

[Interruption on tape.]

And the busing thing still bothers a lot of folks. But it's not a top thing. Not a top priority. . . .

J.B.: So you don't really think race is that much of an issue anymore.

Coon: Huhuh. [I don't know/ Hell no.] I don't know what's it going to become of parties period. [?] Whose book was that The Party's Over ?

W.D.V.: David ^{Broder}~~Broder~~. [?]

Coon: Yeah, I read that. He's right, too. Parties don't do anything. Democrat party here doesn't do anything. There's really not even a party. Their people are less active than ours.

W.D.V.: Yeah, we heard that.

Coon: And it's a voter attitude is what it is. A battle of voter attitude, and of course we lose that one. But if we were doing something then I think that people would vote for Republicans. Looks like I said. My training is not in politics, but to me the party should really be something. I mean, you know, really be active. It ought to be involved in public education. And it ought to be a vehicle back from an informed people to translate into something in the legislature. Now I had a program put together where we would go to the people on different issues. I mean at the precinct level. And develop that feeling, that consensus, and then come back and put our program together. On a two year basis. And then take it to the legislature. And put it in even if you have but two people. But man, that's a big job and you got a lot of people involved. That's a big organization when you do that. But I think it would work.. And I think if we did that, then they'd start to be respected again. Hell, I've never even seen my precinct worker. Don't know. . . would. . . don't know if I have one. Most candidates have, maybe one-third organized. A third of the precincts,

you know, have chairmen. And then the rest don't have anybody. And the third that do have are not active. So the party's/parties not respected because they don't do anything. What little they do is negative.

J.B.: Is there anything else you wanted to ask? Is there anything else you wanted to comment on that we haven't covered?

W.D.V.: Or what should we ask you that we haven't asked?

Coon: Well, if Win-Paul doesn't come and if I get out, it's going to go back to a post office thing. And if Win-Paul doesn't come and I stay in, I think it will grow, but it will have it's problems. Because of the old vs the new. The new concept vs the old.

W.D.V.: How important is Win-Paul?

Coon: If Win-Paul came and I stayed, it could come together. It really could.

J.B.: What would he give it? Money?

Coon: He'd give it money; he'd give it influence; he'd give it power. He can call people--I don't know whether he can, but my impression of a person like him is that he can call people and, you know, just put the money together in a hurry.

J.B.: And do you think the fact that he's Win-Paul Rockefeller, that he would also just generate a lot of excitement?

Coon: Uhhuh. That's what I mean by influence.

J.B.: So in effect it would affect the image of the party.

Coon: Exactly.

J.B.: As suddenly moving and progressing. . . the potential being there in getting rid of the loser image. This sort of thing?

Coon: Right. But I can bring it something he can't bring it. He's been before the Arkansas jaycees. I don't know if you ought to tape

this or not tape it. Turn it off for a minute on this.

[Interruption in tape.]

But you see where I'm headed there? Does that make sense? But there are so many ifs in that thing. I don't know. It doesn't really look to me like he's interested in it.

J.B.: Have you ever, you know, just sat and talked to him?

Coon: You can't get to him. Yeah, I've just sat and talked to him in a social situation where you make small talk.

J.B.: But you've never had a long serious talk to him about the Republican party?

Coon: Huhuh.

W.D.V.: Has anybody?

Coon: I don't know.

J.B.: Have you tried?

Coon: No, because he's got a bunch of people after him to exploit him and I don't want him putting me in that category. If I could break through all that and we could communicate, yes. But I don't want him thinking of me as one of those coming after him with my plan to get in his pocketbook. Because I think I can bring as much to it as he can. I really do. And I'm not boasting. There's an element to it that Bumpers had that you can't buy. And I think I could bring that to it. But he's got something that I don't have and will never have. So, if I could approach him like that and we could develop an understanding, it would make a lot of sense. But you start out fooling around with aide number 32. And they all treat you like you're another guy with your hand out. And I just, frankly, haven't had the time to fool with it.

[Might tomorrow?] But it turns me off to have to go through that. Maybe I'm being too sensitive, but. . . . That would work. That combination would work. That it would. But he right now is looking altogether like

a farmer. I mean he went to school down at SMU somewhere, Baylor. Took a range management course to run that farm up there. We couldn't hardly get him to the Winthrop Rockefeller Memorial. Which Nelson came down to speak at. Almost didn't come to it.

J.B.: How would the Republican party in Arkansas react to Nelson Rockefeller as a potential presidential candidate in '76?

Coon: They wouldn't. They have a feeling for him because he's Win's brother but they still perceive him as a liberal. There's a couple guys that would be for him. There's a couple guys that would be for Percy. But most of them wouldn't.

W.D.V.: Most of them for Reagan?

Coon: No, they're not that conservative. I'd say most of us are for Ford, maybe Connally, or Baker. But I don't think anybody's thought that much about the presidential nomination at this time. Things can change a lot between now and then, I'm sure.

W.D.V.: Hope we didn't keep you from your dinner.

Coon: No, but somebody's got to take me home.

W.D.V.: Okay.

[End of interview.]