

SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics ProjectTAPE LOG -- REP. DANIEL T. BLUE, JR.

Interviewee: REP. DANIEL TERRY BLUE, JR., N.C. HOUSE

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: Friday, Jan. 19, 1996

Location: Blue's downtown law office, Raleigh, NC

Tape No.: 1.19.96-DB (cassette 1 of 1)
(approximate total length 70 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Daniel T. Blue, Jr. Blue has been a major figure on the North Carolina political landscape and pioneering African American political leader since the early 1980s, serving since 1981 in the NC House and as that body's first-ever African American Speaker during the 1991-92 and 1993-94 legislative terms. Born April 18, 1949, in Lumberton, Robeson County, NC, Blue was educated in the local segregated public schools, earned a degree in mathematics from North Carolina College in Durham (now North Carolina Central University) between 1966 and 1970 during a period of ongoing civil rights protests in Durham, and then attended Duke Law School, graduating in 1973. From 1973-76, Blue practiced law in Raleigh in former NC governor Terry Sanford's politically well-connected law firm, and began his involvement in local Democratic Party and African American politics. In 1976, Blue departed the Sanford firm to co-found Thigpen, Blue & Stephens, an all-black Raleigh law firm. In these years Blue led the Wake Black Democratic Caucus, which challenged the established Raleigh-Wake Citizens Association by appealing to a younger and more progressive generation of black residents and activists. Blue narrowly missed election to the NC House in 1978, but since 1980 has won eight consecutive two-year terms. During the 1980s, Blue labored in the House, typically in conjunction with the NC Black Legislative Caucus, for political redistricting, the King Holiday, greater workplace safety and tax equity, increased educational and health care spending, and against any introduction of a lottery, among other concerns. Following the 1989-90 term, during which Republicans and a minority of dissident Democrats orchestrated a leadership coup that deposed Speaker Liston Ramsey and broke his eight-year reign in the House, the House Democratic Caucus chose Blue as Speaker. Blue's tenure as Speaker ended with the election in November 1994 of a Republican majority in the House

Substantively, the interview was organized around several major themes: the evolution of black political activity in NC during the late 1960s and early 1970s; his earliest political involvements in Democratic Party and African American politics in Raleigh in the mid-1970s; his House service during the 1980s and the circumstances that led to the 1989 House leadership upheaval; the issue of political redistricting; his selection as Speaker in December 1990-January 1991; and the recent enormous electoral successes of the GOP. As is the case

with all interviews I have done for this series, every effort is made to explore, through the lens of the interviewee's particular range of experiences, the following overarching themes: (a) the dealignment/realignment in NC party politics and the Republican reemergence; (b) the evolution of African American political activity in NC since the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965; (c) the evolution of women's political activity in NC in the same period; and (d) the centrality of cultural/social politics in the state's political contests and debates during these three decades. NB: This interview contains very little background biographical information on Blue; for that discussion, see the Marjorie Smith interview, cited below.

See Also: For further discussion of Blue's personal biographical history see the extensive oral history by Marjorie Smith (his niece), March 27 and 30, 1994, conducted for the Law School Oral History Project, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (tape copy and full transcript on permanent deposit at the Southern Historical Collection, UNC-CH).

Subject Headings: North Carolina Politics & Government; North Carolina Democratic Party; North Carolina Republican Party; African Americans in North Carolina Politics; Civil Rights.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

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- 001 [I neglected to make an the typical opening announcement, which would have been, "Interview with N.C. House member Rep. Daniel T. Blue, Jr., for the Southern Oral History Program's series, 'The North Carolina Politics Project,' on Friday, January 19, 1996, in his Raleigh, NC, law office; the interviewer is Joe Mosnier; the Tape No. is 1.19.96-DB."]
- 008 His "relatively upbeat" views of the political prospects for African Americans in NC in the late 1960s -- comparative assessment of North Carolina's civil rights experiences in the early 1960s, civil rights participation in college 1966-70 ("you had to take sides" and get involved), his belief that "blacks would move into the political mainstream" encouraged by the 1968 campaigns of McCarthy and Kennedy, impact of the King assassination and how it forced the taking of a "reality check" and yet an upbeat feeling remained, how the King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations prompted him to shift his career ambitions away from graduate education in mathematics and toward the law and public service, how the Humphrey campaign in 1968 and Henry Frye's election in that year as the first

African American member of the NC House in the twentieth century gave him further hope that blacks could indeed enter the mainstream.

- 108 Reflections on Reginald Hawkins' 1968 NC gubernatorial campaign -- while Hawkins had no realistic chance to prevail, his candidacy had important symbolic value for black North Carolinians.
- 121 Events of the early 1970s continued to encourage Blue's view that black prospects were on the upswing -- the political campaigns of Howard Lee for Congress in 1972 and Mickey Michaux in the early 1970s for the NC House, and Blue's heavy involvement in Lee's 1976 race for NC Lt. Governor.
- 165 Blue's involvement ca. 1973-76 in local black and Democratic Party politics in Raleigh and Wake County -- the "galvanizing" effect of Clarence Lightner's victory as Raleigh's first black mayor, the highly political nature of the Terry Sanford law firm and the expectation that its members would be politically involved; the efforts of politically active young Democrats including Hugh Cannon, Bob Spearman, Elizabeth Cofield, Jim Shepard, and Ralph Campbell, to recruit new arrivals to Raleigh and encourage their active participation in local politics and inspire a sense of duty to serve.
- 210 Blue's role ca. 1973-77 as a leader of the new Wake Black Democratic Caucus [WBDC], a group that challenged the established Raleigh-Wake Citizens Association [RWCA] for influence in the local black community -- genesis of the Wake Black Democratic Caucus, Blue's efforts to recruit members most of whom were under thirty-five years of age, becoming chairman of the WBDC in 1974, how the WBDC recognized that half of the city's black population lived outside Raleigh's traditional black neighborhoods and sought to organize these voters, how the WBDC "out-hustled" the RWCA and garnered considerable support, how the WBDC by 1975 was a formidable local political force that could control the outcome in many precincts across the city.
- 270 (cont'd) The Wake Black Democratic Caucus's effort ca. the 1977 Raleigh mayoral race to operate independently of the traditional RWCA-white liberal coalition -- how the WBDC split violently with the RWCA in the 1977 mayoral race, the victory of the WBDC-backed candidate, how this victory was somewhat "hollow," healing the split between the two organizations by 1978 at the time Blue was beginning to look to other venues for political leadership including a race for an NC House seat, how his WBDC leadership enhanced Blue's reputation.
- 340 Blue's 1978 House race -- fallout from the split with the RWCA may have cost Blue a 1977 appointment to fill a House vacancy and may also have accounted for his slim margin of loss in the 1978 House primary, how the narrow loss made him determined to run again in 1980, regaining the full support of the RWCA faction.
- 367 NC black leadership ca. mid-1970s -- Howard Lee's role as the leading black political figure in NC particularly with his run in 1976 for Lt. Gov.; leaders of the

small black contingent in the General Assembly including Mickey Michaux, Henry Frye, and Joy Johnson; Durham leaders including Howard Clement, Levonia Allison, and John Stewart; Ben Ruffin and John Larkin; meanwhile a group of younger black leaders were emerging who favored a new style of "coalition and inclusion politics."

- 422 The overarching political strategy for advancing black political influence in NC in the mid- to late-1970s -- a decision more aggressively to push for local black political successes.
- 462 Blue's personal political ideology ca. late 1970s -- how his experiences to that point, particularly his successes in gaining access and influence with the Raleigh mayor for example, encouraged Blue to a politics of pragmatism, a politics of "practicality and reality."
- 505 The circumstances during the 1980s in the NC House that culminated in the 1989 Mavretic coup deposing Liston Ramsey as Speaker, including in particular how Ramsey's unilateral control of the House made possible the GOP-inspired plan for his ouster -- "from 1981, when Liston became Speaker, [through the time of his 1989 ouster], ...there was no formal Democratic organization in the House. I mean, the House was Ramsey and [Billy] Watkins and lesser players they would name from time to time...."; "there was no real Democratic organization, no real democracy; the governor...dealt directly with Ramsey and Watkins... and the decisions were made as to what would happen, and that's what happened."
- 535 (cont'd) GOP Governor Jim Martin's primary objective was to build the GOP, and Martin was happy to see the House in trouble.
- 569 (cont'd) Blue's assessment of the gains achieved during the Ramsey tenure as Speaker: gains for "workers, consumers, average people" and the successes of the Black Legislative Caucus in pushing a fairly progressive agenda for minorities.
- 578 (cont'd) Details of the coup -- "More than anything else, the Mavretic coup was brought about generally by Jim Martin and the Republicans" and its purpose "was to break up the old Democratic stranglehold on running the Legislature"; how Martin was able to craft a public perception that the House was controlled by an illegitimate clique.
- 614 (cont'd) Mavretic "could not be forgiven for having taken the king's head off" and hence while he instituted certain important changes in the way the House was run, still he was not able to get much done as Speaker; consequently the focus shifted back in the direction of legislative results rather than form.
- 621 The issue of political redistricting and Blue's attempt in 1981 to redistrict NC state legislative districts -- how he came to question his earlier belief that blacks could indeed win election in multi-member districts in the state's major urban centers faded, and how he remained concerned about the wider impacts of the creation of majority-minority districts.

692 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 1.19.96-DB]

- 001 (redistricting, cont'd) How he favored leaving multi-member legislative districts intact where blacks had won seats; redistricting to create minority districts in certain urban centers and also in eastern NC where blacks had never won more than a very small percentage of the white vote; the Justice Department's insistence that the urban centers be redistricted into individual single-member districts rather (as Blue preferred) into a combination of one new minority district and the remainder a multi-member district.
- 045 (cont'd) Blue's conviction that majority-minority Congressional districts were required if NC ever was to elect African American Congresspersons, and the effort to create the NC's Second Congressional District.
- 057 (cont'd) Assessing the impact of redistricting: his ongoing recognition that carving out too many black voters can create the conditions for politicians in remaining districts to ignore the political concerns of minorities; how Republican leaders "with a great degree of hypocrisy, openly [have been] hostile to minority districts but in every effort that they can, try to create more of them to pull the black vote out of predominantly white areas"; "My thoughts on [redistricting] are still evolving, but I will say that I am not firmly in favor of an absolute principle of carving out black districts at any expense and at any place possible"; how he is "intrigued" by such notions as proportional voting but not yet ready fully to embrace such proposals.
- 100 Details of his selection as Speaker in Dec. 1990-Jan. 1991 -- how Blue cultivated the general idea that a black member could be Speaker particularly given the prospect of solid support from the fourteen or fifteen black members of the House; how the Black Caucus resolved on Blue as their candidate and lobbied for him; Blue's confidence that he was very well qualified to be Speaker; ensuring that his elevation be understood not as a "hostile takeover" but as a sign of fairness and appropriate given Blue's tenure of service and credentials.
- 148 The GOP's stunning reemergence, particularly in Nov. 1994, and Blue's view of the ultimate causes for the GOP successes -- the causes are complex but Blue sees race as a central component; hostility to the Democratic Party among new suburban immigrants to NC; "I will argue publicly and privately that the Republican Party in NC is still primarily predicated on the race issue, and that's what's fueled it and that continues to fuel it, especially in the eastern part of the state"; the Democratic Party's difficulty defending certain positive features of the status quo when supporters of those features do not see them as threatened and hence do not speak out politically; his view that the 1994 election results are not necessarily indicative of a permanent party realignment and that the 1996 election will be much more indicative of where voters want their political leaders to take them; how the GOP in NC and the South have skillfully deployed code language

to exploit racist predilections of many voters; how the opposition to black political gains is part of a long historical pattern and hence nothing new.

290 (cont'd) Blue's belief that the years ahead will prove at least as promising for black office seekers and black political interests as the exciting years of the late 1960s and early 1970s; his cautious optimism even in the face of many challenges and setbacks.

328 [End of Side B. End of interview.]