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Interview with Alan Steelman, Texas Congressman, January 30, 1974,
Washington, DC, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed
by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: How would you summarize the major changes that have
taken place in Texas politics in the last couple of decades and where
it is now?

Steelman: I think Texas is a lot like other states in the South
and Southwest. It's moving out of this provincial state of mind that
it's been in since Reconstruction. And I think we're seeing ourselves
as an equal partner, if you will, in the Union. I think that all this
change has been for the good, primarily. However, the biggest problem
we face, as I see it, is that we are now, because of the relatively low
quality of life in other parts of the country, we're in the driver's seat
now. We in the South. For the first time since Reconstruction. How
are we going to cope with all these people moving in and all this new
industry moving in. And how we are going to avoid the mistakes that
have been made in other parts of the country. I think is a big challenge.
I've been active in Texas in trying to promote--I'm active in the Congress
trying to promote a land use planning bill. I'm on the Interior commit-
tee. And a big part of my campaign in Dallas was in this whole quality
of life question and trying to encourage Dallas to avoid the mistakes of
the cities of the North. To move to land use planning and to start con-
centrating on quality. That is, improving the schools and the law en-
forcement system, public transportation. For the people who live there
now. Rather than concentrating on trying to encourage more and more

people to move there. Which is what we've been doing. There have been significant changes, brought about by new attitudes among the people in the South. Those attitudes are reflected in the people they are electing to public office now. The second major area of change is this matter of things being so bad in other parts of the country that people are moving in now. I think the big challenge for us is to prepare for that move. Major political change is getting ready to take place in the South.

J.B.: When did you get active in the Republican party?

Steelman: I grew up a Democrat and my parents still are. My dad is a steelworker. I became a Republican when I was ten years old. I remember listening to the radio the night that Ike was elected president. Like any ten year old, I was impressed with the five stars and the military hero just returned from Europe. And I decided then that whatever was good enough for Ike was good enough for me. And it was as simple as that, really. I studied political science in college and was very active in student politics. Became a Republican precinct chairman when I moved to Dallas out of school. Went down there to graduate school at Baylor. After that I went on full time on the staff of the local party there as executive director. I came here as director of the president's advisory council on minority business enterprise and stayed here until '72. Went back to run for Congress.

J.B.: Philosophically at least, you have an image of being much closer in position, I think, to many of the more newly elected Southern Democratic elected Congressmen than newly elected southern Republican Congressmen. Is that fair, or not?

Steelman: The party in the South has developed in large part in response to shifts in the national Democratic party. Many of those who have left the Democratic party and come to the Republican party and run for office have been more conservative, patterned along the lines of the southern Democratic party. And I welcome all of them into the party. But I think that our party, and our system of parties in this country, has to be broadly representative of different ideological points of view. I do not--as some people in the Republican party advocate--want to see us become the conservative party or the Democratic party become the liberal party. I think then you start to create a European kind of system where every point of view and every special interest group has their own political party. And the ballot gets long and unwieldy and all this sort of thing. And there are, especially in Texas--George *Bush* is a good example of someone that I consider to be a moderate Republican. Paul *Eggers* ran for governor in Texas in '68 and '70. Moderate Republican. Linwood Holton is another example. So I think there is emerging in the South a Republican party that is broadly representative, further than one that is strictly provincial. I think the strictly provincial characteristic did mark the early days. But I think we're moving away from that some now.

Walter de Vries: But on the balance, though, when you look at Helms, ~~Thurman~~ *Thurmond*, Scott, the Congressional delegations--aren't they essentially much more conservative than the Democratic delegations to Congress. That , Bush are atypical of what you're finding in the southern states?

Steelman: Yes, I'd say so. If you take the numbers, you will find more of the first that you described than you will the second group. But in a qualitative sense I still think that there will be more and more a broadly based Republican party in the South. Governor Dunn of Tennessee has not been an overly ideological governor, but I think that he generally is a centralist. I think there are some good examples of people who are more in the center of things. I think they are more and more emerging these days.

W.D.V.: Yeah, but essentially you are having a movement of disenchanted Democrats into the Republican party who are essentially Democratic party rightists. Certainly not centrists.

Steelman: That's right. I would wager that I'm the only member of the Republican delegation out of the South that moved into adulthood as a Republican. For whatever reasons. My reasons for being a Republican are as irrational, probably, as most people's. You know. Your grandfather was. Very few of us ever sit down to think out what we believe and which party most closely reflects that and then make our decision accordingly. But even given that, I would imagine that I'm the only one that really grew up and went to college as a Republican. Many of them have moved out of the Democratic party. And have moved out because the national Democratic party is becoming too liberal for them. By necessity that means that their conservative viewpoint is going to be reflective of the Republican party in the South.

W.D.V.: Does it also tend to mean that they are also ideologues? Take a guy like Helms, Thurman.

Steelman: By and large.

J.B.: When you became an adult, surely you thought it through and confirmed the earlier feeling. When you thought it through as an adult, then why did you decide you were going to stay a Republican?

Steelman: I've got five basic principles that I pay closest attention to in the legislation that I work on and the votes that I cast. That would be fiscal responsibility, a free market economy, clean environment, human rights and strong national defense. Now three of those--strong national defense, the fiscal responsibility matter and the free market economy--are certainly, clearly in the mainstream of Republican thinking nationally. The other two--the environmental matter and the human rights matter--you can get great philosophical arguments among Republicans on those two items. And so I think there is some divergence there. But I think, generally speaking, I'm in the mainstream of national Republican philosophy. As opposed to the national Democratic philosophy as I see it emerging. Which is not a fiscally responsible stream of thought, it seems to me. Certainly not free market economy.

J.B.: The Nixon administration is hard to fit into fiscal responsibility--or what one thinks of as that. Deficit budgets almost every year.

Steelman: Yeah. The free market economy area, too? I think in both those areas the administration has departed from what I would consider to be traditional Republican thought. And I've been a very foe of wage and price controls program. Have legislation in now to repeal the economic stabilization act. On the budget deficits thing, I think the same thing applies. The president has not been faithful to his earlier pronouncements about the need for balanced budgets. I'm not

a hard-line ideologue on deficits. I think there are times when it is necessary to stimulate the economy. But I think that has to be the exception rather than the rule. And it has truly been the rule during all five years of this administration.

J.B.: What's been the impact in Texas of John Connally's switch? Texas Republicans.

Steelman: I think the jury is still out on that. There's been no wholesale defection of Democrats over into the Republican party at all. And I frankly do not think, in terms of ballots, in terms of votes, there will be a big difference. I think his big impact at the state level will be raising money for Republican candidates or, on the contrary, keeping money away from candidates in the Democratic party. He's very well connected in the financial establishment in the state. I think his biggest effect will be there. I think the day of the personality cult, with the possible exception of the Kennedys, is a by gone thing. There has been a personality cult in Connally's case in Texas. But I don't think it's one that means that because he endorses you or because he campaigns for you that there's going to be any transfer of popularity or transfer of votes.

J.B.: At the southern Republican meeting in Atlanta in December there was a great deal of talk about realignment. Democrats switching over to Republicans. Mills Godwin talked about it. Connally was there. Was there anticipation when Connally switched that a lot of Democrats would follow suit?

Steelman: There was speculation. I didn't expect it to happen and I don't expect it to ever happen.

J.B.: Was Watergate a factor in that? Would there have been more without Watergate?

Steelman: Well, perhaps. But I really don't think so. Texans at the national level, that is the presidential level, have

split tickets since 1952 with Ike. Ike carried the state both times. Kennedy-Johnson carried it in '60 barely. And Johnson carried in '64. Let's see, Humphrey carried it by 40,000 votes in '68. Nixon carried it in '72. At the Senatorial level, John Tower has been re-elected twice now. Won the first time and has been re-elected twice since then. I think Texans have been discerning for a long time at the national level. At the state level I think there will always be a conservative Democratic faction, a liberal Democratic faction--within the Democratic party--and then the Republican party. We essentially have three parties in Texas. And I don't think anything that happens at the national level--such as Connally switching, because his importance is primarily of national significance--I don't think that's going to effect it. There's just too much tradition. Too much party tradition that people have at the court house level and the state house level. To be turned completely around on that. I think they will continue to split tickets the way they have, but I don't think anything--the defection of any one man regardless of how popular he is in the state--is going to mean wholesale defections to the Republican party.

W.D.V.: For the foreseeable future you see them continuing to split only for national candidates, but not at the state wide level or for the legislature?

Steelman: That's right. The only thing that will move significant

numbers of Democrats into the Republican party, in my judgment, will be when the state-wide Texas Republican party presents a platform and a slate of candidates that are broadly representative philosophically of that state. And so far the Republican party have not done that. Our image is a country club, vested interests, big oil. The people in the state, the average guy, does not perceive that he may, in cases of individual candidates--George Bush has done very well there. I know he's lost two times state-wide, but still he's polled over a million votes both times and has done well. John Tower has done well. But those were personalities. The party will never be a viable force until we become a party that reflects the broad philosophy of the state. So I think it's going to require an issue re-orientation. And I would hope along the lines that I've suggested. I think Texans, by and large, are dedicated to a free market economy philosophy. I think they are strong on national defense. I think they believe in fiscal responsibility. They have a no deficit clause in the Texas state constitution. I think Texans, because we still have a lot of open space, are concerned about what's going to happen to it. With all these people moving in I think we've got to be more environmentally conscious. The party does. And I would like to see the party move more toward an issue orientation. And I don't think we've done that.

W.D.V.: More and more as we talk to southern Senators and Congressmen it's obvious to us that with the removal of race as an issue, they've now been able to think about other matters. In the Texas delegation is there a consensus at all on any issues that face the state? I

mean among the Republicans and Democrats. Is there one thing that you can say the Texas delegation agrees on? Issues before the Congress.

Steelman: This is my first year. The only thing that I've seen, issues that I've seen that could command--we've got 24 Congressmen--that could command the support of 20 or more of those 24 have been on wage and price controls. As I recall there were about 20 votes against price controls. The fuel allocation act. There were 22 votes against it as I remember. On other things there's a pretty good split. We all get together on projects that affect Texas. We pitch in and sign letters on various things, like the LBJ Library and stuff like that.

W.D.V.: But only on an issue that relates only to Texas and a few other states--oil--and wage and price controls, you can't say there's much consensus in the delegation on a series of issues?

Steelman: I would not include environmental issues among this and I wouldn't include human rights in this, but I think on the other three things I mentioned--strong defense, free market economy, fiscal responsibility--that there's a consensus of sorts on those things

but I think if you asked them all, most of them would say, on those three things, they believed in them. I would think. Twenty of the 24 would.

J.B.: Texas has somewhat of an image outside the state, perhaps more than any of the other southern states, of being politically controlled by big money interests. Gas and oil and banks and related. Is that basically true?

Steelman: I would say that both big business and big labor in

Texas have a great deal of influence. For the same reason I guess they have in other states. They're the ones that make the contributions to campaigns.

J.B.: Does labor make major campaign contributions?

Steelman: Yeah. Labor supported Ralph Yarborough all the way in a big way money-wise. Supported Bob ~~Amstrong~~ very heavily. And Barbara Jordon heavily and Charles Wilson heavily. Both financially and. . .

J.B.: Does most the money originate within the state or outside?

Steelman: I don't know off hand. There is a lot of outside money that comes in. But I don't know how it will break down percentage-wise. And likewise on the conservative side, both Democrat and Republican. Oil is a big source of campaign money. In Dallas and Houston you have people like Sam Wiley and Ross *Pent* and others who represent a new generation of money. Both those guys made their fortunes out of the computer business. And they're not tied to traditional sources of Texas money. They're sort of high technology type industries.

J.B.: What kind of political role do they play in the state?

Steelman: Primarily campaign contributions.

J.B.: Do they contribute pretty heavily?

Steelman: Very heavily. Those two. I know Wiley, who has contributed to my campaigns. I don't remember in '72 how it all shook down but up to then he had been the largest contributor to either party. He and his brother gave \$175 thousand to Nixon in '68.

J.B.: Is he pretty much of a Republican supporter?

Steelman: Well, I'd say he's philosophically more like I am. I used to work for him. We're good friends and we think alike. For

example, he was a delegate to the '68 Republican convention. He threatened to support Percy. Ended up not casting his vote for Percy, but I think that's symbolic of his general philosophy. He's more in that line than he would be Reagan, for example.

W.D.V.: Is there any community of interests between freshmen Congressmen, Democrats and Republicans--people who have only been here two years or four years--in the South? Among all the Congressmen from the South, both Republican and Democrat.

Steelman: Having grown up in the South and having a feel, I think, for the southern mind set, I can easily see lots of parallels and similar values and that kind of thing. You know, the traditions that we associate with the South. Caring for your neighbor and friendliness and, I think, concern for the soil and a sense of community and all those kinds of things. I don't think, when it comes to voting on national issues, there's a lot of similarity. I haven't checked everyone's voting record to see, but I don't see any great similarity. Liberal Democrats in the South tend to be less so than liberal Democrats in the North, for example. Conservative Republicans in the South tend to be I think about the same ideologically as other conservatives in the party.

J.B.: What kind of role does Ross ^{Pero}~~Pero~~ play in Texas politics?

Steelman: Contributor. He's given to both [Republican and Democrat]. I would say more to Republican candidates than to Democrats but I know he was a big contributor to Dolph Briscoe's gubernatorial campaign last time. He chartered a plane down to Miami back in '69 at the big fundraising dinner the Democrats had for the national Democratic party. Flew a bunch of people down there. But he's been a big Nixon

backer I know. He's not given me anything, but he has contributed to people at the Congressional level. Both parties.

J.B.: On what basis? I mean just people he likes, represent what he feels is his philosophy or that he just wants to have access?

Steelman: My judgment would be it would be access, but I don't know. I've never talked to him about it, so I don't really know. There doesn't seem to be any real common thread philosophically through the contributions he makes to various candidates.

J.B.: Who would be the best political reporters in Texas?

Steelman: I'd say Winston Body in Austin. He was a wire service guy. Now he's got a show called Capital Eye, which is a public television show out of Austin. The only state-wide program--it's a Meet the Press type format. He's good. Rod Calhoun with the Dallas Times-Herald is very good. Sam Kent with the Dallas Morning News, Austin bureau. Fred Bonavito with the Houston Post, Houston bureau. Margaret with the Dallas Times-Herald's Washington bureau. There's a guy named John Ford who is with the San Antonio Express that's really good. I'd say those would be the top ones.

J.B.: How do you assess the reporting in Texas Observer?

Steelman: I think it's probably one of the best sources of. . . well, political intelligence, rumor, behind the scenes politics that we've got in the state. It's got a definite far left liberal bias, I think. I would not consider it to be in the mainstream of even Texas liberal politics.

J.B.: But if you read the liberal bias out, basically the reporting is solid?

Steelman: That's right. As long as you go into it knowing that you've got an ideological bias to contend with, it's very good, I think. There are a couple books on Texas politics that you may or may not be aware of. Money, Marbles and Chalk was written by a guy named Jimmy Banks about two years ago was very good on the last twenty years of Texas. There's another one about that Sharpstown stock scandal but I can't remember what the name of it was.

J.B.: What has been the impact of that in Texas politics?

Steelman: It's been substantial. I think and I hope that Watergate will have the same effect on national politics. I think it made the way for a lot of the state government reforms that we couldn't have gotten otherwise.

J.B.: Were there any individuals who were sort of at the forefront of the reform movement?

Steelman: Price Daniel, who is the current speaker of the house, was.

J.B.: He's the former governor's son?

Steelman: That's right. He'd be a good man for you to talk to if you haven't talked to him. Bill Hobby who is the current lieutenant governor. See, Ben Barnes was lieutenant governor when he ran for governor. And Hobby succeeded him. The lieutenant governor of Texas precedes over the senate, so they can give you both the house and the senate. John Hill, who is current attorney general, would be good to talk to. It could have, if the Republican party had been a real sensitive platform, meant substantial gains in Republican numbers. But what happened, many of those Democrats who were involved with the scandal--either direct-

ly or peripherally--were defeated by the Democrats. Reform Democrats. They had an ethics coalition made up of both Republicans and Democrats in the house called the Dirty Thirty. Tell you a good Republican to talk to in Texas would be Fred Agnich. He was a part of the Dirty Thirty. He's a very wealthy oil man, a Republican, about 55, who ran for the legislature and got elected. He's from Dallas. He's the current Republican national committeeman from Texas and also is in the state legislature.

J.B.: How would you characterize the Republican party in Texas at this time?

Steelman: I think all the opportunity is still there to capture a significant number of independents and disenchanted Democrats. But so far, I think we're still lacking in the sensitivity to the state's needs to successfully pull something off like that.

J.B.: Is the party structure weak or strong?

Steelman: It's strong in Dallas and strong in Houston and strong in Tarron county and relatively strong in Bear county, which is San Antonio. There are county chairmen and committee people from all the districts over the state, but we can't put a precinct organization on the streets to campaign for a candidate or for the party probably in more than twenty-five percent of the counties in the state.

J.B.: Is there basically a weak state organization?

Steelman: Yeah.

J.B.: Who's the state chairman?

Steelman: Jack Warren. He's just newly elected. And he's a moderate. He's an oil man but he thinks in broader terms. I think he'll

do a good job. And he could be the one to pull this whole thing together. But he's only on the job for the last two months.

J.B.: Are there two basic wings, or more, in the Republican party in Texas. Most states usually have a moderate wing basically and a conservative wing basically.

Steelman: Yeah. That's descriptive of the state party I'd say.

J.B.: Which one would be more or less predominant in Texas?

Steelman: The moderate.

[End of interview.]