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Interview

with

JAMES G. MARTIN

September 7, 1995

by Jonathan Houghton

Indexed by Jonathan Houghton

The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project

TAPE LOG

Interviewee: James G. Martin, Former Governor and Congressman

Interview Date: September 7, 1995, 2:00 PM

Location: Jim Martin's office, Carolina Medical Center, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Tape No.: 4007 (Cassette 1 of 1, roughly 80 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of James G. Martin, Governor and Congressman from North Carolina. Martin has been an instrumental politician in helping to make North Carolina a two-party state. His years as Governor saw a rapid increase in Republican identification. This interview covered Martin's early impressions of the Republican party and his decision to join the minority party in the early 1960's. He discusses his congressional campaigns, Watergate, civil rights and the Great Society, Watergate, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Brad Hayes and the "friends and neighbors" campaign strategy that helped Martin win his Congressional and Gubernatorial elections.

Comment: Only the text that appears in quotation marks is verbatim; all other comments are paraphrased, including the interviewers questions.

Tape Index

Tape 1 of 1, Side A

JH: Tell us about earliest impressions of Republicans in Georgia and South Carolina.

JM: I grew up in South Carolina, with a small class so everybody got to do a little of everything--football, basketball, band, Latin club, etc. I got a PHD at Princeton and had no political involvement until teaching at Davidson. I chose to join the GOP "not because of philosophical reasons" but to build up the two-party system. Southern Democrats were conservative. The Democrats, however, were autocratic and needed competition. Eisenhower also played a large role. Notes the limits of Dixiecratic rebellion and resistance of Democrats to vote Republican

JM: Charles Jonas, elected in 1952, built a nucleus of Republicans here in Charlotte. He taught people to split their ticket, but the Democrats tried redistrict against him in "tortuous looking districts"-- the "Jonasmander." Yet, he beat their candidates and taught more Democrats how to split tickets. Areas taken from him stayed Republican and helped to elect Jim Broyhill and Earl Ruth. So that's what was going on and I wanted to be a part of it.

Filing system helped his precinct to track who the Republicans were; with organization the Democrats lost their 7:1 lead and today it's a "toss up." As Governor, I didn't shirk the responsibility of building up a two-party system. Tried to draw Republican minded voters into the party. Need stronger registration to win lower ticket races and be more competitive throughout the state. As conservative Democrats changed registration, conservative candidates found it harder to win primaries and even more "defected" to the Republicans.

JH: So you see a two-party system offering more choices on a liberal-conservative basis?

JM. Basically yes. Democrats used to say they ran the state. It was that blatant. Fortunately the GOP became the more conservative party. But in the South in 1960 the Democrats were conservative.

JH:" Did you know any Republicans when you were growing up?"

JM: didn't know any.

JH: How were they talked about?

JM: Didn't talk much about them; they were like a curiosity. I did not know anyone who took drugs then either. There was a lady down the street who was a drug addict, but I didn't know what that was. I used to refer to the GOP as standing for "greater opportunity for Postmasters" because of the patronage tilt of the party. It's now far beyond that. We're more than half of the Democrats registration now in this state. The ratio was 1 to 6 or 7. When I ran for Gov. in 1984 I needed more Democratic votes than Republicans.

JH: Did many of the Democrats that you used to honor in your speeches, who would stand up, come through the gates to enter the Republican party?

JM: "It was in effect an alter call" of sorts. We'd have a closing invitation afterwards if they believed in the Republican party to join and many of them did.

Notes continuing racial polarity of Southern politics, and states, "hopefully we'll grow out of that." A lot of that comes from re-districting which takes strength away from other Democrats, who are white or conservative or whatever.

JH: You tried to bring Blacks into the Republican party, what did you find most successful?

JM: conscious effort of recruiting campaign workers from minority community, especially professionals not tied into the party machinery and those who would be upset at the way the Democrats tied blacks in with bloc voting. In first Congressional race, "I'd get 2% of the black vote." second campaign got to 4% and 3rd got to 7%. But we couldn't make a dent in the delivery system of black campaign structures. Refers to the Ed Rollins comment and it's ironic that Republicans got burned for that comment as if Republicans were culprits for that system. A good cadre of professional African-Americans worked in his administration, a record breaking number for North Carolina. His record is better than any Democratic Governor in terms of hiring and appointing blacks to salaried and appointive positions and minority contractors.

The black population is close to 22 percent, but minority contracts are nowhere near that. "I set a goal of 2 percent." Not a set-aside, though. No quota and you don't get thrown in jail if you don't meet it. At first black supporters said a goal is empty. Others set Jim Hunt had set a goal of 5%, but only achieved .01 percent. We achieved not just 2 percent, but 4 percent. Then we set a goal of 5 percent.

JH: In 1965 race created a sharp division in America and you made your first race in 1966. Did you sense a different set of priorities between eastern and western Republicans in the state?

JM:: I didn't have much exposure to Republicans in other parts of the state back then. And that was mostly through social events. Not much to unify the party except for those who went to state conventions. Division between Helms and Holshouser, however, led to greater attendance at conventions. I realized that both sides need to win some of those internal struggles; you need ways to heal those wounds. One of my lonely initiatives was to bring the Helms and Holshouser (and later Martin team) together. Helms and I get along fine, but his organization greeted my '88 candidacy with a primary opponent for a while. Both wings need the other side and they understood that. Tom Ellis, Carter Wrenn and the NC Congressional Club recognized that and gave me a hearing. They raised some money for me and we helped to close that issue. Sure, we'll have battles.

In 1972, the choice of state chairman became the first expression of the rift between the party, with the Gardner-Holshouser wings squaring off. I don't regard myself as very conservative, but I am a conservative, especially on fiscal issues.

JM: When was MLK assassinated?

JH: April 4, 1968.

JM: That's right. I was chairman of the County Commissioners. I hoped to heal wounds and called on people of all parties to rise beyond housing restrictions so housing would be open to all in our community. It didn't work out the way I had hoped it would. Later learned that standing by your convictions can help even conservative opponents to respect you, because integrity is respected. Phil Van Every, past mayor of Charlotte, tested him once, seeing if I would back off with a little pressure about his stance on Open Housing. When I stood firm he said I passed the test. "If you are true to your convictions... most people will respect that. That's the key to the abortion issue." Lee Atwater believed this as well.

Side B, Tape 1 of 1

JM: Abortion... you've got to have a position. Study it prayerfully, and be consistent and clear without trying to be all things to all people. "Don't make it the fulcrum of your campaign." Stick with your views and you'll lose only those who strongly disagree with you.

JH: There is possible dynamite here for the GOP. A majority of grassroots Republican workers are pro-choice, according to a recent survey.

JM: That's right, but it depends on how you define it--abortion for cosmetic purposes? There should be provisions for abortion in the case of incest or rape, that's my position. Issue of parental consent. There should be exceptions in case there are problems at home. Who pays for it and how? That's another issue. Set up a private fund for some of these girls.

JM: Does that cover most of your bases?

JH: Ah, Watergate is a topic I wanted to hear your thoughts on, on how it hurt party morale...

JM: In 72 I was very comfortable running with Nixon. I had a slogan "A vote for Martin is like two votes for Nixon." In 74 the media repeated that slogan an awful lot. That was the lead-in for every show on me that year. I tried to

maintain high standards for what evidence was acceptable as a grand jury member. I got by in 1974. My opponent that year made gentle references to the Nixon episode. He was a gentleman in that regard. Maybe he realized he couldn't tie me to it. What did hurt, though, was that "a lot of our workers were demoralized." When they worked in phone banks, they heard snarling voices from too many people and so they backed off and stopped making calls. The grassroots just didn't turn out.

What really hurt was in 76, when everybody figured I was a shoo-in. The organization pulled out and I ran against a very weak candidate, but it was the closest race I had.

JH: Did other dynamics that year contribute to the closeness? Ford and Reagan had a bloody primary in this state and the party seemed very divided?

JM: I expect so. That's the sort of thing I wanted to patch up when I was Governor. Senator Helms was very involved in the Reagan campaign and emboldened by that campaign. Holshouser, however, backed Ford and wanted to avoid that battle. But that's the one I really squeaked by in and Carter was strong.

JH: After Ford pardoned Reagan, you and Holshouser were denied admission to the Republican National convention by the Helms' forces. Did that hurt?

JM: I ran against my weakest opponent. You have to conclude that it did not help me. But, it wasn't till late that we realized that we would have an opponent. We should have assumed that all along. But '76 was not Watergate impact. It was related to that only because of the pardon and many of my supporters didn't object to the pardon. Nixon made an early come-back support down here after Watergate. Even cynical reporters seemed awed.

JH: How important was Brad Hayes?

JM: Tremendous. We built two careers together--his and mine. He was a genius regarding NC politics and a gifted technician regarding polling, fundraising, direct mail and hand-to-hand fundraising. We used polling to find out not what to believe, but to identify areas where I needed to work harder to persuade people that my position was right. Brad devised the "Neighbors Campaign." Others have adapted pieces of it. It had several phases. First, we identified 3 types of precincts--friendly, moderate and hostile. We tried to boost turnout in the friendly ones without stirring up the hostile areas. We bought two copies of the city directories and filled up file boxes with street addresses. We got volunteers to call people on every street, trying to



find a contact. Where we found an ally, that person would do two things: 1. hand out literature; 2. fill out a card saying you did your tasks. It was a powerful secret weapon. When I ran for Governor we did this state-wide, where directories were available. That was a Brad Hayes invention. He didn't impose his philosophy upon me. I couldn't have been elected to Congress without an ally like that.

JH: What type of people joined your neighbor's program?

JM: The whole spectrum, no defining characteristic.

JH: Jonas used women quite a bit to do his precinct tasks in the 50's...

JM: Gardner did too. But we didn't notice a gender bias that way. We did have a lot of women--and students too. Brad Hayes and Bob Bradshaw and I went out with them and helped put on bumper stickers. We tried to impress them on how important that was.

JH: Is there anything here that we have not talked about concerning the rise of the two-party system?

JM: We talked about the religious conservatives and they have been extremely important to us. They have not insisted on a degree of purity, for the most part, and work well with those of us who don't agree 100% with them.

JH: Has the Congressional Club done that? They backed Funderburk against Broyhill?

JM: Some purist candidates can win. I'm impressed with how well Helms has done with such a clear philosophy. of course he had several thousand editorials to help him clarify his views. We need people like him in the Congress to articulate the other side. He's a "balance wheel." For those who get polarized there's a tendency to do so with his campaigns. America's very fortunate to have someone who can articulate a philosophy that clearly."

JH: How important were Jesse's editorials towards building a Republican philosophy during the 60's?

JM: I wasn't aware of his editorials during the 60's, I listened to classical music and they were not carried in Charlotte.  
I was with Jesse two nights ago at the head table here in Charlotte.

JH: DO you have a sense of why Jesse and the Congressional Club had a falling out?

JM: Yes , but it's not my place to resolve it.

JH: How important were the padded fees that some employees used to enrich themselves?

JM: Maybe what you ar getting at is the high costs of direct mail.

He's still got to raise money through all those old techniques and that will const a lot of money. I don't know that was the cause of the rift--that's more the nature of an organization devoted to intense fund raising. Look at the percentage of costs incurred by organizations raising money for charities.