Interview number A-0148 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

This is an interview with William Jennings Bryan Dorn, United States Congressman from Greenwood, South Carolina. The interview was conducted by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries. The transcriber was Susan Hathaway. The interview was held on January 30, 1974.

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN DORN: The only thing is that I am just envious, I wanted to beat you to it and throw in some of that humor that I've heard in my own areas on the County to County tours with Thurmond and Johnston and Byrnes and ~~Bleeth.~~ Blease. I have heard, I guess, all of them . . . all of your great demagogues except Henry Hall I stood on the platform with ~~Bleeth~~ Blease and with Cotton Ed Smith and people like that, and the things that I heard is worth printing, I'll tell you.

J.B.: We are starting with the period from '48.

Dorn: The Modern Period.

J.B.: Right, and you've been active . . . what changes, major changes that you have seen in southern politics and in South Carolina politics?

Dorn: Well the main changes in South Carolina and in southern politics has been the race question. You see, it

Noy SHC

was the order of the day almost for every politician to bring up the race issue. Even since '48, but not anymore, and that has been as great a change in attitude and along that line than any other change of a similar nature I think in the history of the world. I mean, politics are just completely different in that length of time, and the truth is that the black people are now voting, they have the vote, and they did not then. They didn't vote in any great numbers, and they had the white primary and all that business so all of that has made politics completely different in the South and in a short period of time. The appeal to the electorate is entirely different. Your old southern demagogue politician, to cover up their inability to do much about anything about economic ills, the Sharecropper, the Tenent Farmer, eroded land situation, the Company Store and the Country Store where they owed their soul . . . the people, to cover up for their inability would jump on the race question. I mean this was standard in the South for almost a hundred years, and it was an emotional thing. But this is not true any longer. In fact in the business there is less racism in southern politics today than in any other section of the country, and I have travelled throughout the country and listened to the jokes of things people tell me. It's really incredible really, in some

NcU
SHC

areas they think they are feeding to me as a southerner about [making some] racist joke or something. I mean in Detroit and places like that, which I don't appreciate and never did, and your southern climate has just been entirely different. You are aware of that custom, Jack, and this has been the major change in southern politics.

J.B.: What has it meant, this change.

Dorn: Pardon?

J.B.: What has it meant?

Dorn: Well, it has meant more job opportunity for black people. I heard the statement that they would never integrate the textile industry. They are completely integrated today. Many textile plants employ 40% and 50% black. In fact, I don't really think that the textile industry could really function nearly as well as it does without black employees. There is a shortage of labor in my area, and so this has had a tremendous impact on your textile industry and on the economy. You see, during this period your Sharecropper, your Tenent Farmer, was absorbed into the textile industry largely. Now a lot of them went north in droves seeking employment, and then on the other hand a lot of them were absorbed into growing, expanding textile industry, and this has been almost unnoticed but in place of the old row crop, erosion in environmently bad agriculture you have grass and trees and

NcU
SHC

this has made it possible. You don't go from this Share-cropper, Tenent Farmer, these people worked in industry and this has created an orderly transition, not a revolution like you had in Franch with people marching on barrels with pitch forks, and the peasants all joining in because of high taxes and all that stuff. You had this orderly, rather amazing transition from an agri-cultural to an industrial economy without riots, or without any great . . . . This has been the result of it, I mean the result of this political power in the hands of black people. Quite often in many communities, they are the balance of power, and . . . of course, your income is still down, less than the national average. Per capita income is what you spend on education, but still it has improved greatly and your housing and things like that; in a lot of areas since I have been in the Congress, in rural South you had the out house and things like that. Now they have electricity and washing machines and drying machines, bathrooms and the negro people, the black people used to . . . in my own neighborhood carry water in buckets from somebody's well maybe a quarter of a mile away. Those same people would point out that they live in brick houses and have bathrooms and work in the textile mill. It is just as simple as that. You've got textile employment, and it used to be that just a lot of those people had no opportunity except in some form of menial labor, and this

NcU
SHC

has been the result of it. Andy Young told me this, this is a little bit off the point, but a little bit belated, but Andy Young in a discussion group, and of course as you know he represents Atlanta now. He is a black representative and they have a black mayor. Andy came here and he is well liked by southern members of Congress, and they asked him in a discussion over here not long ago "why did the South . . . seems like less tension and difficulty in other areas on the race question at the moment," and he answered very forthrightly and quickly . . . he didn't hesitate and he said "because the southerner is basically," they asked him if it was the Church, and he said "yes, that played a big role." Because in a lot of the cities where they had these movements and all the Church people would sit down, black and white, but the main thing was the South's respect, and I never heard it put this way before, for law and order. Respect for law is what he says. The average southerner hesitates or has a kind of an inherent respect for law, and he gave this illustration. He said he was in one southern state and went into a restaurant and they beat him up and threw him out, and after the Civil Rights law was passed, he went back to the same restaurant and they all shook hands with him and welcomed him. They said "it's the law, come on in." He told a group of us that over here not long ago.

NcU
SHC

There has been a big change in the South.

J.B.: Do you see a difference between the new Democratic members of Congress elected from the South within the last three, four, five, six years and members . . . most majority of the members who were elected twenty years ago.

Dorn: Yeah, most of your new southern members of Congress have become more liberal, more progressive, more liberal and less race oriented and all of that. In fact, they don't talk too much about that anymore, and that, I guess, is the big difference, is that southern members used to . . . to be elected they had to be extreme conservative in most areas, although you had a lot of liberal people in the South like Bilbo and George Wallace, liberal in everything except race. Olin Johnson, but they are more liberal on everything today than they were formerly. You see, the South is less rurally oriented than it used to be. It used to be almost exclusively a rurally oriented. It still is to a great degree because you have no large cities except Atlanta, and places like that, Charlotte and New Orleans, Birmingham, and Memphis, but you take a State like South Carolina, outside of Columbia maybe and Charleston and Greenville, there is still a small town rurally oriented State. The people in the towns came from the country, and this still makes for, you know, pretty conservative philosophy, but it is more broader and national than it used to be. Their

NcU
SHC

thinking is more national and international. Well they have always been international. The ~~first~~ third Congressional District was represented by . . . most of it, by Jimmy Byrnes, Secretary of State, John C. Calhoun, Secretary of State, Hugh S. Legree was Secretary of State. Well that is three of your fifty-two secretaries of state from one Congressional District. I think that Hugh S. Legree served a kind of an interim Secretary of State, but the point is that they were internationally minded from the beginning all the way back, but sectional and national affairs but today they are more national and increasingly so than they were twenty years ago. I am talking about the people and the politicians who represent them.

J.B.: If you project ahead, do you see the Southern influence in the Congress as a waning becoming less?

Dorn: Well, it may be less in that they were the balance of power in the Howard Smith days and Bill Colmer, ~~German,~~ and Senator Richard B. Russell and all of them. The South was the balance of power, whichever way the South went in Congress, that's the way it . . . a measure, depended on whether or not it passed, and in the future you will not have that leverage, but we will still be, I think, more influential in conventions, in national political conventions, and you'll have fewer committee chairman from the South, you have fewer today than you had a few years ago, and to that extent you won't be as powerful in

NcU
SHC

national affairs. In fact, during the era that I have served here, I believe the South wielded more power in Washington than at any time since the Calhoun era. Calhoun, Webster, Haynes era of American History; and South Carolina then was the leader of the Democrat thought and the Democratic philosophies and took the place of Virginia. The early leadership it was Madison, Monroe, and Jefferson and Washington, all that crowd; then they were succeeded and the national leadership to a great extent by South Carolina leaders, and then the sectional issue began to become paramount, and we lost that leadership, and of course with the Civil War, the South lost out altogether, and so for the first time since the Calhoun era, under your old coalition, the South was tremendously powerful in government. In fact, you couldn't do anything without Dick Russell, Walter George, Harry Byrd in the Senate, and ~~Vincent~~ Vinson and Howard Smith and this group from the South. This was the era, since I have been here, of the South's greatest influence in American government for well over a hundred years, and we are losing that, and losing it rather rapidly. We had it one time here since I have been here with 14 of the 21 Committee Chairmanships in the house and all of them in the Senate except maybe Bible in the West and two or three western Senators, Scoop Jackson was the head of some Committee, and there were non from the industrial East, not a single Committee Chairman in

NcU
SHC

the United States Senate five or six years ago was from New England, the mid-Atlantic States, or the North-Central. Only from the South and the far-West did we have Committee Chairman, but you are losing that rather rapidly. Other sections of the country are beginning to . . . so I think you have less power. This is due to the old coalition that is the thing that most people don't think about and don't realize, but you couldn't pass legislation here for years without Howard Smith and Richard B. Russell and people like that. You just didn't get it passed, and so to that extent we are losing some of our Congressional power and influence, but I think you will pick it up more in the national conventions. During that era, when we were so powerful in Congress, we were just a minority in the Democratic National Convention and even less than that in the Republican National Convention, but now you are an influence, they seek in the conventions to have . . . I mean, the South is playing more of a role, perhaps not in the last one when Senator McGovern was nominated, but I believe that in the future, we will have more influence in the national conventions, and in other cabinet posts and things of that nature 'cuase your population in Texas and Florida, their vote delegates in the convention are substantial. Of course, Texas has always had, you know, they look almost traditional and therefore a Vice-Presidential nominee from Texas, but this has been kind of

NcU
SHC

a . . . of course, there are a lot of things that account for the . . . and the power of the South in Congress, I think, has led to the Southeast being the nuclear center of the world. A lot of these industrial developments are maybe by-products of what Richard Russell did in bringing all these military installations and people like Mendel Rivers and industry was attracted to a degree by the fact that people did bring new things, Redstone Arsenol, Space Program, Cape Kennedy and all of those places. This came to the South and it just kind of created sort of a look South attitude in industry, or helped do it, it was a contributing factor, and a lot of people have overlooked the fact but the South was extremely poor and even though today your standards are lower than the national average, still that is debatable because it takes so much more to live in a place like Washington and New York. I know because I live on a farm there and I stay here. So my money does go further down there so it may not be what the national average is, but the standard of living may be just as good as the national average, and maybe better in some rural areas because . . . particularly now when you have wood and all that and fuel is running short, but anyway, a lot of people thought that this southern power in Congress was largely an instrument to maintain segregation, but on the surface it was not. It did for a while do so, but at the same time, it was a

NcU
SHC

power base where great industry sought to build plants where they would have this more conservative philosophy in government, not be taxed to death and this kind of thing; and also maybe to escape from certain aspects of unionization. But the last twenty years has been the most powerful . . . the South has been the most powerful influence in government, in Washington in any time since the era of Calhoun, and I'm a little proud of that. I mean this is an observation that to me is very real because I have lived with it, and I've known what you could do in TVA, and you walk into a conference in the Senate, they close the doors, the Speaker would come in, and he was from Massachusetts or ~~Rayin~~ Rayburn from Texas, and Mr. Smith would be sitting there, Chairman of the Rules Committee. Richard B. Russell would come over. This was it. You get your dime or you don't. You get your . . . I know they offered me four hundred million dollars one time on the ~~Stanley~~ Savannah River. I didn't take it because of a promise; I mean, this is beside the point, but just to give you an illustration how popular we were. They came out and said here it is, we agree, and we'll adjourn this House and Congress and go home. I said "no, I promised a hearing by a certain group and they have not been heard," so that went down the drain. I only mention that to show you how powerful they were

NcU
SHC

and in that meeting was Senator Richard B. Russell, Howard Smith from Virginia and the late Bob Kerr, . . .

J.B.: Is this going to mean a lessening of this type of public works projects in the South if the South does lose its influence in Congress and the grasp of the Committee Chairmanships?

Dorn: Well, not necessarily. There is really kind of a new consensus here. We don't have that absolute power in the form of the old fashion dictatorial Committee Chairman, and you do have influence in other ways. I mean the South is simply . . . it has developed, it has grown, it's not as poverty stricken as it once was, and it is just a little more sophisticated even in political circles like in Congress, and I don't think it means that . . . I think industry and things like that will continue to come that way because of the climate and various other reasons, and good State government. You still have largely conservatively oriented State government in the South . . . legislators, Governors generally . . . . You don't have your old time Governor demagogue that would call out the National Guard every so often and made the headlines, but they are still often referred to by business as the last frontier of , and .

W.D.: Are there any issues that still unite southern congressmen now that race is gone? Either economic or social?

NcU
SHC

Dorn: The race question, of course, used to bring them out. I can't think of any major issue now except maybe defense. The South, of course, the installations in the South would perhaps have something to do with that plus the fact that we have traditionally been kind of patriotic and gung ho when it comes to foreign affairs, you know, military matters. But they generally vote pretty strong on that and . . . but I can't think, economic issues, public works and things of that nature. You still get pretty much unanimity of opinion from the South. It's more like the mid-west, I guess, in political philosophy regardless of party, and of course in my life time I have seen the advent of the . . . I mean in my tenure in Congress the advent of the two party system in the South. You used to not ever see a Republican Congressman. Well, maybe one or two from Tennessee. Well, when I came here Carol Reese, was Republican and the Chairman of the Republican party from Tennessee, and I remember him very distinctly. There were none from Georgia or Alabama, Mississippi or any of those States. I don't think we had one from Texas, and maybe you had . . . no, we didn't have any from North Carolina. We had one from western Virginia when I came here, Walton, way out there near Bristol in southwest Virginia, but this was all. But now you have a number of Republican Congressmen all the way through; two from South Carolina. South Carolina is a little bit different politically than

NcU
SHC

any other State in the Union. There is kind of a . . . for some reason, well of course it is the heart of the Bible belt, and they have kind of a sympathy vote, that's why I don't think this Watergate thing would really effect too much how they feel about the President. If they ever felt he was being persecuted, they'd get more for him, and another thing about . . .

J.B.: Well, is South Carolina different in that respect than any of the other southern states?

Dorn: Mostly because I remember in 1928, South Carolina voted for Alfred E. Smith and Joe ~~Rawlings~~ Robinson. I was a kid and I remember this. North Carolina went overwhelmingly for Hoover and most of the southern states went for Hoover. Normally you would think that well, a State like South Carolina, Bible belt, Baptist wouldn't vote for a Catholic, but they did by ten to one; overwhelmingly in 1928 they went for Alfred E. Smith from New York City, a Catholic, and this is why I say that South Carolina is different. [Interruption] A man from Arizona told me not long ago that he would have that old piece of a radio on in his car in Arizona in 1928 and heard Greenwood, South Carolina, my home town come in, Al Smith, he said, 320, Hoover, 15. That is the kind of vote, and now, of course, it's . . . You know I've got to go, Jack.

NcU
SHC