

Interview with Jerry O'Keefe, from Biloxi, Mississippi, March 27, 1974,  
conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: You are now 25 and serving your first term in the  
house.

Jerry O'Keefe: I'm 27 right now and this is my third year in the  
house. It's my first term.

J.B.: Okay. I keep forgetting it's a four year term instead of  
two years. And your father was in the house before you.

O'Keefe: Right. '60-'64.

J.B.: Are you a lawyer?

O'Keefe: No. I was in law school at the time I was elected. I  
was at Tulane Law School in New Orleans. After I was successful in the  
election it was necessary to move back to Mississippi. They kind of  
frown on people living in Louisiana representing Mississippi.

Walter de Vries: Did you finish school?

O'Keefe: No, I just quit. I'll be working with my father now.  
My father's the mayor of Biloxi, by the way. He just got elected last  
summer.

J.B.: Let me ask you one question about Biloxi. We were looking  
at some election returns. The urban areas on the Gulf are one of the  
few urban areas that Sen. Eastland ran very strong in. Well above his  
state-wide percentage.

O'Keefe: I think that Eastland's strong in the money circles, you  
know. And the money's concentrated in urban areas. And that's where  
his influence comes. He helps people on the coast a great deal in

business. So that's what I'd attribute the main thing to.

J.B.: In that Congressional race down there, the Democratic nominee carried that county against Trent Lott also.

O'Keefe: Well, the Democratic nominee was from that county.

J.B.: Is that the explanation?

O'Keefe: He was from Harrison county. And as far as carrying the county, he did rather poorly at that. It was less than 60 percent. Trent Lott did pretty well on the coast and outside of Jackson county. Which was a little surprising. We weren't satisfied with the campaign that Ben Stone made at all. Thought he handled it rather poorly. But I don't know that he could have won. I mean Nixon took it very personally in Lott's race.

J.B.: Did that reflect Lott's better showing down there than Carmichael's?

O'Keefe: I'm sure that's true, yeah. Julie Nixon came down and made a speech for him. Nixon really got involved in it. He made some statements about it and was on television with him. Had pictures of the two together.

J.B.: If he had done the same thing for Carmichael, could it have made a difference state-wide? We heard two theories. One is that if Nixon had really backed Carmichael, Carmichael actually might have won that race. The other is that it really wouldn't have made any difference.

O'Keefe: I think it would have had some influence. I think the attitude that Nixon took towards the race led a lot of people to believe--you know, even some Republican people felt that maybe it would be

better off with Eastland, who is philosophically a Republican anyway.

W.D.V.: How was this term in the legislature different from what you thought it would be?

O'Keefe: I was just amazed, you know, at the difference between what you read in books about political history and state government and all that and the way it actually works and the way you read about it. Such a great difference.

J.B.: What were the differences? What did you expect and what did you find? You said you quickly learned how things operated. How do they operate in Mississippi? That's what we--

O'Keefe: I'm sure they operate probably the same everywhere. As far as I've been able to tell. When you read about how a bill becomes law, read that it's introduced and then it's referred to a committee and then the committee can appoint a sub-committee to study it. And they study it and make a recommendation to the committee which in turn makes a recommendation. And then it's debated fully in the committee and on the house floor. And that's just not true. You see bills go flying through the legislature with a special interest group pushing a particular piece of legislation. The debate is very limited. There's no real consideration of merits of the bill whatsoever. It's just jammed through. It's kind of frustrating when you see things like that happen.

J.B.: What are the interest groups that really have that sort of influence? That if this interest group wants a bill through it's going to be almost automatic? In South Carolina, for example, I don't know of a bill that doesn't get through if the bankers. . . .

O'Keefe: Well, the bankers are definitely probably most strong outside interest in state government. And they have been for several years, I think. And there is no bill, really, that the bankers need to push through because they've already got them all through. They have everything they could possibly want. Outside of them, I'd probably rate the Department of Agriculture as second. And then the junior colleges are right in there. They're within the government itself, but nevertheless they operate pretty strongly.

J.B.: They have their own lobbyist?

O'Keefe: No, they just take people on the state payroll and station them here in the capital. That's how they operate. I don't like it. I was the chairman of a sub-committee this year to study ethics. We had several bills on ethics and conflicts of interest and lobbying and all that. There was a lot of public support for it, but unfortunately there wasn't a whole lot in the legislature. So we're going to have an interim study committee this coming year on it. But the whole field just needs to be looked at in this state. At the outset this year I made a public statement attacking the interest groups such as insurance, power companies, banks, retail merchants and manufacturers. All of these people have unregistered lobbyists. And I named who they were. Previous to this year, the law we have has been on the books since 1914. The most lobbyists we've had register in any one year is fourteen. Right now--as of about a week ago--over fifty have registered this year. As a result of that. But oddly enough, none of the ones that I had named have registered. You know, the most



effective ones. We've had the women's groups and all these, common cause, AFL-CIO. These people have registered. But none of the ones that I named have registered.

J.B.: Their lobbyists don't even register at all?

O'Keefe: No.

W.D.V.: What happened when you named the names?

O'Keefe: It caused quite a furor. It was really controversial in the legislature. Because these guys are nice guys, you know, and they make a lot of friends over the years. People really in the power structure who are liberal thinking and progressive, even they got timid when it came to picking on somebody like that, you know.

W.D.V.: I did a book on lobbyists in Michigan. Then when I was a delegate at the constitutional convention I <sup>wrote</sup> read the provision about lobbyists and conflict of interest in the legislation. And I had more enemies at just the introduction of the first one on lobbyists. Never quite recovered from that. Once they got used to the idea of being regulated in the sense of being registered and just report what they spent, they didn't object to it. But that first step was extremely difficult.

O'Keefe: We have a real strong law as far as lobbying and registration is concerned.

W.D.V.: What is your interest in this regard? How did you arrive at that?

O'Keefe: I was just named the chairman of a sub-committee. So I took it from there.

J.B.: What do you think are the major issues facing Mississippi--

in terms of political issues, genuine issues?

O'Keefe: Well, we had one issue this year that I was really concerned with. We passed a consumer protection bill. I was the author of it. I've been trying to pass it for three years now. It passed both houses. I think that that was something that was really badly needed in this state. Over forty states have these kind of laws, you know. Similar to the FTC law. So far as personal interests, that was my number one state-wide personal interests. Other issues facing us--there's no telling what kind of spin-offs this energy crisis thing is going to have. We haven't, this year, experienced any concrete problem that we could deal with at the local level other than some allocation of extra gas supplies that come through the governor's office and things like that. Probably the greatest need in the state today--what needs to be looked at the most--is our tax structure. We have very low corporate tax. Corporations are taxed at the same rate as individuals in this state. I think our severance tax on timber and oil needs to be looked at. Think the state income tax needs to be looked at. The sales tax. Mississippi was the first state in the country to institute a sales tax. Did you know that?

W.D.V.: Do you know why?

O'Keefe: Yeah I know why.

W.D.V.: Is there any difference or concern about issues between the younger members of the legislature like yourself and some of the older ones? Do you notice any distinct differences?

O'Keefe: Yeah, well, one of them really became apparent. Part of the people in the power structure now in the house--I'm just speaking

for the house, not the senate--are fairly young. Under fifty. And they have accrued to these positions of leadership through hard work and they are really progressive. I think the house has good direction in it right now.

W.D.V.: Progressive in what sense? You mean the old populist sense?

O'Keefe: No, I think they are progressive in terms of the race issue. It isn't reflected throughout the membership of the house, but the power structure itself, the people who comprise what I call the power structure in the house, are progressive in that area. They're progressive in, I think, most reforms outside of two. One is the conflict of interest type thing and the other is the open meetings proposition. We saw virtually nobody in the power structure--you know, quote--vote for these open meeting propositions that we had in the house. Even though, I mean, it's hard to argue against it, really. You can't sensibly argue to me that you should have closed committee meetings. I can't think of any valid arguments for it except, you know, in certain cases where a person's integrity might be reflected upon or somebody's up for an appointment to a position or something like that. I was surprised at the attitude that these members took in regard to both of those issues.

J.B.: How about ethics legislation?

O'Keefe: One of the issues I was talking about was ethics.

W.D.V.: When you say power structure, are you referring to the presiding officer and the committee chairmen?

O'Keefe: Right.

W.D.V.: You think they are atypical of the rest of the house?  
And more progressive?

O'Keefe: Yes, yes. In this state, the legislature is a lot stronger than the governor, to start with. The Speaker of the house has an inherent grip on what's going to happen in this state because he comes back year after year. That's different than the lieutenant governor running the senate. And he has just virtual. . . all the power he wants. All he needs to do is exercise it, be strong enough to exercise it as Walter Sillers did when he was the speaker. He was the speaker for I think forty years or something. They name, first of all, all the committee chairmen. There are no elected committee chairmen whatsoever. He names the vice-chairman. He names who goes on what committee. And then he refers every bill to every committee. The power to be able to do that alone. . . you could control anything you want.

J.B.: Am I correct that the bills are just arbitrarily assigned to which ever committee? It doesn't really matter too much what is in the bill?

O'Keefe: No, I would say generally that the bill will go to a committee that. . . you know.

W.D.V.: But the option's there.

O'Keefe: I mean you have bills that deal with two fields. Like for instance we had the milk bill to establish a milk commission up this year. The speaker, had he wanted--he sent it to the agriculture committee-but he could have sent it also to ways and means because it was going to raise revenue by taxing processes.

W.D.V.: Or it could have gone to appropriations because it needed one.

O'Keefe: Right. And sometimes you'll see the speaker use that. But normally, just because of the speaker's enormous influence, it isn't necessary for him to have to use the power in that way. It's kind of one-way. When you don't even have an opportunity. But the speaker, what he would probably do, he would send a bill to committee but then he would let it be known in no uncertain terms that he doesn't want this bill to come out of committee. Of course the committee chairmen, all being his lieutenants, they name all their sub-committees. And if they want a particular bill to die they just find three guys who are opposed to the bill and say you're the sub-committee, how about studying this for a couple of years.

W.D.V.: How can the house leadership be younger and more progressive than the total body when seniority determines who's going to end up--or doesn't it determine that?

O'Keefe: Seniority isn't followed in the house, not strictly. There are people with a lot of seniority that don't even have a committee chairmanship.

J.B.: Is the speaker elected by the house membership?

O'Keefe: Right. I think that the more capable members of the house are the ones who have ended up with the key committee chairmanships. I mean if you're going to be the speaker, it's going to be your responsibility to try to have an orderly legislative process. You've got to have people who know what the hell they're doing when

they come down on the floor with a piece of legislation, you know. And the best thinkers and the more hardworking people are the ones who have ended up with the chairmanships. For instance, the fellow who's acting chairman of ways and means right now has only been in the legislature fourteen years. There's probably twenty people been in here longer than him. Chairman of appropriations hasn't been here. . . well he's been here a while. Chairman of banks and banking, John Stennis, ten years. Insurance, Teddy Mallette, he's been here ten years. All of the positions like that are falling to people who work. Plus there's an attitude of a lot of the older members that they just don't want the heat. They want to be here and have a good time and get to vote on everything and be a part of it. But they just can't stand the pressure or something. Don't want the responsibility or either are incapable of handling it.

W.D.V.: So there's another difference than just one based on race. You said the basic difference was ones stand on race, whether it's progressive or not.

O'Keefe: No, well. . . you take a person in Mississippi. And if he's fairly liberal on the race issue, well, you're going to find that he's not going to be a hell of a conservative in all these other areas, too.

W.D.V.: You mean there aren't a lot of people who are very conservative on race and when you remove that issue they're not populist?

O'Keefe: I don't know what you mean by populist.

W.D.V.: An orientation toward the people, more progressive, a greater role for state government, more spending, more progressive tax-

tion, that sort of thing.

O'Keefe: I would just say that the attitude in general. . . they are open minded. They are willing to modify their position after listening to arguments pro and con. They aren't die hard type people that just have a fixed belief and they're going to carry it to the grave. I mean they change with the times. That isn't true of everybody.

W.D.V.: But you're saying that negativism or opposition on the race issue extends to other issues as well and that's the basic distinction.

O'Keefe: Right. It does. Has anybody mentioned to you that we passed a resolution in the house about a month ago memorializing Congress to repeal the voting rights act? We had four no votes. ME and three other blacks. The one black in the house voted against it and Walter Brown from Natchez and Jerold Bussey and myself from Biloxi voted against it. That's how scared they are of it. And that does not reflect the true attitude of the people sitting over there. But when it came to them pressing a button for or against it--they had a vote immediately before that on to recommit it back to the rules committee. I think it had 36 votes tried to recommit it.

W.D.V.: Those representatives perceive that back in their districts the people are still that up tight about this?

O'Keefe: Right.

W.D.V.: Is that a correct perception? Did you catch a lot of hell when you did it?

O'Keefe: I guess I was contacted maybe ten times about the vote and every one of them was favorable. They were real happy. And they

weren't all black, either.

J.B.: What has been the impact of the voting rights act in Mississippi?

O'Keefe: I don't think it's had much impact. I think as far as actually changing the legislature, changing the elected officials, which is the great potential it had, today we see only one black in the entire legislature and house. I mean, you can judge from that alone. The fact that they have more people registered now. I can't understand why the blacks don't exercise their power. They have it. There's close to forty counties, close to half the counties, in this state with a black majority of population and voters. Why don't they send blacks up here? Beats the hell out of me.

J.B.: Does it effect the type of whites that are sent up here?

O'Keefe: I think it effects them to some degree. I do. I know of some that are really just hard core segregationists. But they come from a district where--there are several like that, who actually come from these counties with black majorities. But they are very quiet. You know, there are some that are pretty vocal. But these particular ones, even though they really feel strong, are mighty, mighty quiet about it.

J.B.: The only effect  
rhetoric.

*to*  
is cut down on the

O'Keefe: Yeah.

W.D.V.: But even so, when you have a test on the rhetoric and you push the old button again, they had five guys or four guys who had enough. . . . Now suppose that was not a resolution. Suppose it



was a bill that would have done something.

O'Keefe: I don't know. Scares me.

W.D.V.: What you're saying is that it's the perception of your colleagues that it's still that hot out there.

O'Keefe: Either that or just a tradition. It's really ridiculous. I got a kick out of one particular legislator who is in the power structure, a really progressive guy, you know. He couldn't bring himself to vote against it, so he just left the chamber. Didn't vote for it. Took a walk. That's the only single one I saw take a walk. And that's the only issue I've ever seen him dodge. The only one.

J.B.: What would happen if someone introduced a resolution in the Mississippi house to designate Martin Luther King Day in Mississippi on his birthday. Not as a state holiday, but as a designated day. What would you think the vote would be?

O'Keefe: It would be a bad vote. It would be mighty red up on the board.

J.B.: Would it be similar to this vote on the voting rights act?

O'Keefe: I imagine.

[Interruption.]

J.B.: When blacks run, do they normally run for the legislature as a third party candidate or in the Democratic primary?

O'Keefe: They usually run as Democrats. Everybody runs as Democrats in this state. Just about. We have two Republicans in the house. Did you know that?

W.D.V.: Let me get back to that mind set of the legislators. What do they think is going to happen to them? Something happen back

in the district? It's not going to be raised as an issue in any future campaign, is it? As an open, blatant issue any more?

O'Keefe: Well, I hope that there will be some severe repercussions from that vote.

W.D.V.: What I'm trying to get at, it seems to me that in some ways the people may be ahead of the legislators.

O'Keefe: How?

[Interruption.]

--is much more liberal I'd say than any other section of the state. The delta area, believe it or not, is probably second, outside of the race issue. As far as taxation and things like that.

W.D.V.: Is the fear a real one in terms of repercussion?

O'Keefe: I'll tell you what the fear was. The real fear, reaction I felt, when the thing was on the floor, was that the people on the floor were mad at the rules committee for making them have to vote on it. Because it was a clear cut issue. They were going to alienate one segment or another by their vote. No politician likes to cast that kind of vote to start with. It's a lot easier to try to amend something or do this or do that, you know. And a lot of issues are parallel but not really right at the heart the way that was.

W.D.V.: That's it. You couldn't get a more straightforward vote.

O'Keefe: That's right. And they were mad because they had to actually be put on the spot of having to make that decision. A lot of them really voted their convictions when they voted aye, you know.

W.D.V.: But for a number of them, apparently they did what they thought ought to be done. So how are things any different say on voting

on an issue like that than they were six or seven years ago?

O'Keefe: I'll give you a parallel. Following that vote, we had another bill that come out of apportionment and elections committee, which is chaired by Stone Barefield, who wrote the resolution to repeal the voting rights act. He's forever coming out with different little bills effecting the way you cast your ballot and stuff like this. Like they passed one last year, two years ago, which said that it isn't necessary to put your ballot in this kind of a little folder. To me it meant that a guy has his ballot and he just has to go stick it in the box. Just the fear of having somebody see what the vote is, you know, might make him vote otherwise. Just because it isn't really as secret as it could be. Following this vote on the resolution, we had another bill that would have allowed the election commissioner, at the time of the vote, when the people came to vote, to require that they produce birth certificate, driver's license or other evidence as to their identity. Not that they could produce any one of these things, but that they could require anything that they wanted. I made a motion to recommit that to the committee, boy, and the house sent it back like that [snaps his fingers].

J.B.: There's a difference now that the house just prefers to avoid dealing with racial issues. Whereas six or seven or eight years ago, they almost looked forward to it. This is the sort of thing they enjoyed letting off steam, voting for any sort of. . . .

O'Keefe: Right. I'd say that's a good assessment.

W.D.V.: They were delighted to do it six or seven years ago, but they're pissed off to do it this term. But the net result, if you look

at it just in terms of the record, is the same.

O'Keefe: Right, if you read the record.

J.B.: But also there's much more of a tendency just to submerge the race issue and keep it out of the--

W.D.V.: Yeah, that's why they're so irritated when it's brought up again. I would guess.

O'Keefe: Right. For instance, this last governor's race was the first race in which the two final contenders, neither one of them had race as an issue. Period. Neither one of them spoke anti-black issue in their campaign. The first time.

J.B.: Did either of them use code words at all?

O'Keefe: No.

[End of side of tape.]

--I think that his position, you know, being connected with Kalmer, Kalmer's influence in the election. The fact that Eastland, Stennis-- not Stennis--Eastland, who's really good at behind the scenes politicking for a Democrat, had a strong opponent. He couldn't actively get involved and start pulling all kind of strings for a Democratic candidate when he's got an opponent of his own. And then Nixon's role and just the attitude in general. I mean this state's been Republican all along anyway.

J.B.: But only in presidential elections.

W.D.V.: You mean in philosophy?

O'Keefe: Philosophy.

W.D.V.: Not in terms of their behavior.

O'Keefe: I don't know. I think that this state has a pretty Republican attitude toward business. Look at the way we tax corpora-

tions and their influence in the legislature.

J.B.: What do you think would have to happen for Mississippi to go Democratic again in a presidential election?

O'Keefe: Wallace.

J.B.: Wallace on the ticket or Wallace campaigning for the ticket?

O'Keefe: I don't know if Wallace would campaign for the ticket unless he was on it.

J.B.: If he weren't on it and did campaign for it, would it make any real difference?

O'Keefe: I think it would help. I think probably the biggest thing we could do in this state would be to have presidential primaries here and let the candidates come to Mississippi and let the people get educated to what's going on.

W.D.V.: Any chance you'll get that?

O'Keefe: We introduced a bill this year for it. The black loyalist Democratic faction opposed it and the other faction opposed it.

W.D.V.: [Laughter.] Who's left? You?

O'Keefe: Us, yeah.

J.B.: We hear a lot about the Republicans having an organization and then it's usually defined as they have a fundraising organization. They have an ongoing office. They have paid workers. Do they have an organization beyond that? Do they have a precinct level organization?

O'Keefe: No, not at this point. They're working on one though. What they do have is a solid group in the business community who are Republicans. They're active both in contributions and work as Republicans.

If a person choses to run as a Republican, he's got that to start with, whereas a Democrat doesn't.

J.B.: Why don't they have more candidates for the legislature then?

O'Keefe: I think it's just because of the tradition in this state.

J.B.: You think they will in the future?

O'Keefe: Yeah.

J.B.: Do you anticipate a lot more Republicans in the legislature?

O'Keefe: Yes I do.

J.B.: Suppose the time comes when the two Democratic parties merge. Realistically, that's going to pretty much mean that some of the blacks in the loyalist party are going to have to retain their positions, for them to merge, I believe. And it will mean a much larger role for blacks in the Democratic party. Will this result in a great deal of defection of elected office holders to the Republican party?

O'Keefe: I don't think that in itself would do that, no. But I think that there's going to be a lot of people going to the Republican party. If it hadn't been for Watergate, there ain't no telling how Republican the state would have gone next time.

J.B.: So you think Watergate has hurt the Republican party in Mississippi.

O'Keefe: I think so. It might not have hurt it anywhere near as bad as it has in other states, but it's had its effect. There's no

doubt about it.

J.B.: Do you think if the Democratic parties in Mississippi merge that you're going to end up with a coalition of in effect courthouse Democrats and blacks and working class whites and this sort of thing? Or what? Is it going to reflect the national Democratic party? What will there be?

O'Keefe: No. I don't think it's going to merge, to start with. Ever. The only thing that could happen is if we pass a new law or something and have a different physical make up which is just going to require that whoever wants to stick with it and be in it come on in. I don't think that the blacks will be denied a position in it or influence in it. But their influence isn't going to be anywhere near as strong as it is today as far as national politics is concerned. The big problem with that is the fact that really and truly the blacks do not deserve the voice that they have in the national Democratic party representing Mississippi because they're not a majority in this state. According to the way the Democratic system works, they should have the influence according to their proportion, or some notion like this. Now as far as what's right and what's wrong, that's another question. And the national Democratic party has gotten tired of the bullshit that they saw come out of this state. It's a tough problem to resolve but the black leaders in the thing, they want to keep the status quo now the way that it is even though that isn't right, either. They want to keep it just as bad and they're just as die hard in their feelings as their predecessors who were relieved of the responsibility were. It's kind of ironic, you know, if you look at it in those terms.

J.B.: Was Waller the first governor in many years to declare himself a national Democrat?

O'Keefe: Yeah, I think the other ones. . . you know, the Wallace influence in the last decade or so has been prevailing through Mississippi. Waller's the first one.

J.B.: But if they do get that thing resolved, then what?

O'Keefe: It isn't going to have any impact in presidential elections, but the impact it could possibly have in Mississippi is actually, I think, get us more involved in national politics. I don't think the people in this state have really heard fully debated issues that come to them third hand through jaundiced eyes, you know, of another officeholder. Whispers in their ear, you know, and says man that thing's horrible, isn't it. I think it would be the greatest opportunity to really educate the people that could possibly ever occur. And I think it would have a tremendous influence on the thinking of people in this state.

J.B.: Is someone likely to make a major challenge this year to Lott, for example?

O'Keefe: No.

J.B.: Why? I'm curious about that. It would seem that this would be the year. Not firmly entrenched. He's got the disadvantage of Watergate. He was Nixon's boy. All this sort of thing. All indications of it being sort of an anti-incumbent year.

O'Keefe: I don't know why he isn't drawing any strong opposition. A lot of people wanted me to run against him. I'm just not in a position to do it right now. Got about four calls from Eastland's



office. They said they'd really help me out if I'd go.

W.D.V.: That meant a lot of money.

O'Keefe: Yeah. A lot of strings, too.

W.D.V.: Are the young Democrats of any consequence in this state?

O'Keefe: I'm really not familiar with them. When I went to college I didn't belong to any of that stuff.

W.D.V.: If you're a young person in this state and you want to get active in Democratic politics, what do you do? What's the best route?

O'Keefe: Run for the legislature. And win.

J.B.: Why is Eastland's office wanting you to run?

O'Keefe: Eastland's a Democrat. Maybe not in the true sense of the word, but he belongs to the Democratic party. I think that he and Waller think along the same lines, you know, as far as national party politics is concerned. I think both of them would like to see Mississippi rejoin the national party under somebody that could be sold to the people in this state. Eastland campaigned briefly for Ben Stone, as did Waller and Stennis. That didn't seem to help much and it might have hurt him. Ben ran such a poor campaign anyway, it was just ridiculous.

J.B.: But you do see the Republican party getting stronger.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Gil Carmichael made a real good race against Eastland. Real good. I didn't expect him to run anywhere near that strong. And Gil Carmichael isn't the most attractive candidate in the world, you know.

W.D.V.: He did it without money, without the president's support.

In fact the president's opposition, apparently.

O'Keefe: Well ~~opposition~~ The president was put in an uncomfortable position there, you know, because of the Eastland influence in the Senate and all of that. You know the story. How do you all find Mississippi compared to the other states?

[Interruption.]

Everywhere in the country is television. The impact television has on the lives of people is just phenomenal. They can't ignore shows like Archie Bunker and that kind of stuff. All of that's effecting them. They see the attitudes of people throughout the country reflected. All of this has to be having a part in it.

W.D.V.: Let's talk about Medger Evers. The governor had a Medger Evers Day by proclamation. Now suppose that resolution had gone before the house of representatives. What would have happened to it?

O'Keefe: It would have never been before the house because the rules committee would have never reported it out.

W.D.V.: Suppose it had, just for the sake of argument. The same vote?

O'Keefe: It probably would have had eight or ten votes for it.

W.D.V.: Okay. Governor issues a proclamation and he didn't get any letters at all about that in opposition to him. Nothing. Just a big silence. Big ho-hum out there.

O'Keefe: Blacks don't really know what to make out of Waller, you know, because he's taken a couple of stands--

W.D.V.: I'm not talking about the blacks. I'm talking about the whites.

J.B.: Does anybody know what to make of Waller? [Laughter.]

I mean, what do you make out of Waller? We don't understand him from the little bit we've heard. We haven't interviewed him yet.

O'Keefe: I'll tell you something that really is going to sound funny to you. At the end of my first session at the legislature here, I knew more about legislature and legislation and how to do it than Waller knows right now.

J.B.: Is this the way he is generally perceived in the legislature?

O'Keefe: Huh? No, no. He has the uncomfortable position of being the governor in a state that's controlled by the legislature. Just like every governor before him.

J.B.: Yet why does the legislature not override his vetoes?

O'Keefe: They've overridden a couple of them. You'll probably see them override a couple more this year. The governor likes to have a feeling about whether or not they can override him before he vetoes it.

What would you think if I'd veto that? He'll kind of get the feeling of the power. . . you know, the stronger committee chairmen and the speaker before he'll move at all.

W.D.V.: You mean it's not just a bolt out of the blue.

O'Keefe: No.

J.B.: Does the legislature have any sense of voting on something sometime that they're pretty sure he's going to veto anyway, so they don't mind passing it?

O'Keefe: Well, we did that once already where he vetoes the appropriations for the *PEER* committee. Are you familiar with that? It's this legislative audit committee. That came up for passage over

veto. They said that they were going to re-introduce another bill and a lot of people voted not to override on that basis. But if he vetoes this other bill, it's going to be overridden. It's doing the same thing. His veto had the effect of changing some of the leadership on the Peer Committee and maybe its attitude about some of the things that it's doing, the way it's carrying on its investigations and whatnot. But the legislature would override that veto in a second if he vetoes it again. And he knows that. That's why he isn't going to veto it.

J.B.: But is there any time any legislation has passed--

O'Keefe: No. The governor has only made threats, I think twice. He doesn't use the Nixon ploy of saying if you send it to me this way I'm going to veto it. He just doesn't do that. So I mean the legislature really has no feel of whether or not, and they don't care either. Generally. What his position on it is.

J.B.: Are you saying that if the legislative leadership really cares about a bill that he vetoes they'll override it? So his veto is more bark than bite.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Right. I mean the house will override him whenever they want. If the leadership in the house wants to override his veto, they will. I'll tell you an interesting story about the governor. We had the governor's succession bill for consideration, both three years ago and this year. Which are years when we're going to have a state-wide election and the people can vote on it if the legislature passed it. All of the legislative leaders who have been here, the chairmen, the power structure, oppose like hell to the suc-

cession bill because that would deteriorate their power like hell, you know, if a governor could succeed himself. He'd have all the state employees probably campaigning for him. Plus he would be here long enough to know what the hell's going on. That alone, you know, would be a tremendous help. Well, the bill was introduced and it went to constitution committee. I'm on constitution and so is the speaker, the acting speaker. I mean this is one of his gut issues, you know. I mean above all, not governor succession! So I was working along with Waller on it. Checking with him. And he was pulling all these strings of pressure. . . everybody on the committee to vote for it. So he called me up on the phone one day and says "Jerry, would you mind making the motion to report it out?" I said "Sure, fine. I thought you were going to have so and so do it." He says "Nobody else will do it." The acting speaker was against it, so when it came up for the vote--it was on the day of the deadline. We had to act on it that day or it was dead under the deadline for processing legislation. So I made a motion to pass it out of committee and the speaker made a motion to adjourn, which takes precedence. And we adjourned, eight to seven. I demanded a roll call vote, so I could see who had moved and who hadn't. But it was really funny.

W.D.V.: Pretty close, eight to seven.

O'Keefe: It wouldn't have been that close on the floor. It would have got the hell beat out of it. I went upstairs and I told Waller what had happened. He started slamming all the drawers in his desk, throwing shit around the room. He was really mad. But he's probably going to call a special session this year and that will be one

of the items we consider. But it hasn't got a snowball's chance in hell of passing.

J.B.: If you had to guess who was going to be the next US Senator--if Stennis doesn't run--who would you guess? Who are the really serious, major contenders at this point?

O'Keefe: Well, everybody who is a potential candidate for governor would go for that spot first in a flat minute. That would include Jim Buckross, William Winter, Evelyn Gandy, Brad Dye, Carmichael.

J.B.: Who is Evelyn Gandy?

O'Keefe: She's the commissioner of insurance. She's been in the house and she was state treasurer. You know, she's kind of moved her way up the political ladder. But I tell you one potential candidate who would probably be tough is John Stennis, Jr. In the house here. People like to do that sort of thing.

J.B.: There's some precedent for that. Herman Talmidge, Russell Long, Harry Byrd.

O'Keefe: But I wouldn't be surprised if he would step down this time and John Junior would run. If he was going to do it, he'd be doing exactly what he's doing right now. Saying I'm running for re-election. Keep everybody out. . . well, let's not go raise any money since he's going to run again. Then at the last minute he says "I've decided--"

J.B.: He's up when, in '76?

O'Keefe: "--going to step down. Fine young boy here to step in my place." Of course Waller would run for it in a minute. He'd be in there. Everybody thinks that Waller couldn't win. But I'm not so sure he couldn't. You know, his popularity with the people isn't as

bad as you hear it is in the legislature. Lot of people like to say "My people back home can't stand him." Hell, that isn't true. His popularity is just like that of the president or anybody in the public eye. It goes up and down.

W.D.V.: The worse reading you can get of public opinion is from the state legislature. [Interruption.]

O'Keefe: But the thing that surprised me was this ingrained attitude of the people in the state that the governor ain't going to run it. He ain't going to call the shots. That's just the way it is. The first year he was here, I could have died, it was just so hilarious. All those other bills were dead at this time. This whole program down the commode except for the highway program, which the legislature was going to pass whether he wanted it or not. Had one bill that would reorganize all of state government, or something. It was about this thick. They brought it to the committee room. The chairman says "Let that be the only copy. Don't waste a whole bunch of paper. We're not going to need a whole bunch of copies of this bill." So he put it in a sub-committee of three people. Made Jim Simpson chairman of that sub-committee. Now Simpson was just not going to have a meeting at all. You know, let the deadline kill it, the way it did all the other bills. This was the only one left. Waller was chasing him all over the capital. Jim wouldn't call a sub-committee meeting. Jim Simpson's brother Bill is Eastland's top aide in Washington. Waller calls Eastland. Eastland get's Bill to call Jim. Jim says "Can't help you." No, Eastland called Jim. Jim says "I can't help you." And his own brother, you know, up there working for Eastland. He was going to the

lick log for his figure. So Waller calls Simpson and the other two guys on the sub-committee. He just wrote them a letter asking them to meet him upstairs. And he didn't tell the other ones that he'd written letters to all three. So they walked in the room and Waller was sitting there. He says "Now we're having a sub-committee meeting." [Laughter.] Jim Simpson says "Governor, you're really an ass hole." And the governor says "how do you think it's going to look to everybody? Here I am my first year and I can't even get a bill out of the sub-committee?" Jim says "Well, it would look a lot worse if the sub-committee killed it. The way it is, it's just going to die under the deadline. Governor, that isn't all that bad." Turned around and walked out. Waller hits the ceiling. I need to tell you one more legislative story. This isn't for your book. This guy in the house, he's a real--I wouldn't want to say it for the record [Interruption]--the original Judas, if there ever was one. He comes up to Sonny Meredith yesterday and he says "Sonny, I heard that you told Homer Smith that I was a son of a bitch." Sonny looked at him and says "I don't know where you got that information. That is not the truth. I don't know how he found it out." [Laughter.] He walks off. There's another story about the same guy.

This Raymond Coleman . The year we passed the \$600 million road program they had a bill--you know, it was a question of how it was going to be financed. Every method was being looked at but one of them was a tax on whiskey and tax on beer. And beer isn't legal in all the counties in this state. Most of the highway program is going in dry counties. So they were all for a beer tax to build those roads. So we got a commitment out of the chairman of ways and



means that he would not report out the beer tax bill until he reported out first a bill to legalize beer throughout the state. It would fall especially heavy on our coast area, because they do a lot of the drinking down there. None of the roads were going down there. So the chairman agreed to pass a bill out to legalize beer. The bill came up for a vote. get up and screamed "Don't shove that beer down our throats." It was really a funny debate. You should have been there. Anyway, we voted on it. Something like 19 votes for the bill and 100 against. So that's dead. Then Raymond Coleman comes up to Jim Simpson, right after the vote. Had a reporter sitting there--and this was in the paper--says "Jim, you don't think us killing that bill had any effect on whether or not we're going to pass out that beer tax bill out of ways and means, do you?" Jim says "No, Raymond, I don't believe it has any more effect than the guillotine had on Marie Antoinette." And Raymond says "Who?" [Laughter.]

[Interruption.]

O'Keefe: Every unsuccessful governor, for the last 24 years.

J.B.: This is your father?

O'Keefe: But they've all won in our county. Our county hasn't been right for governor since 1916.

[Interruption.]

J.B.: What is the role of organized labor in your county and that Congressional district and state-wide?

O'Keefe: Organized labor state wide is really weak. They are strongest in Jackson county, where ~~is~~ is. And outside of there

I'd say you jump up to Meridian. Got a little foothold. That's a pretty strong manufacturing area. But as a whole. . . you know, the house of representatives has a labor committee. Have you all heard about it? They have not had a committee meeting in over six years, the labor committee. Just don't meet, period.

J.B.: The increased workmen's comp a couple of years ago. It must have been the lowest in the nation before than.

O'Keefe: That was two years ago. I was in on that. I'm on insurance committee. The manufacturers, man, they're really tough. They put a little circular on everybody's desk the day of the vote on the floor. They were still opposed to it the way the committee had brought it out. And it says at the bottom "Be sure and cast your ballot wisely because Big Business and Industry will be watching that vote." Up sits in the gallery John O'Keefe--no kin to me. But he's the chief lobbyist for the MMA. Sitting up there looking at everybody. So Jerold Blessy busted him. So you hear everybody screaming about Big Brother in Washington, I'll show you where Big Brother is. And he read the thing. "There he is right in the gallery." John got up, stalks out.

J.B.: Why did that pass?

O'Keefe: The chief spokesman for the manufacturers is Butch Lampert. He's now the chairman of ways and means, acting chairman. He's one of the most skillful debaters on the floor in the house. His opponent was Sonny Meredith, who's probably equally proficient. There is nobody better than the two. It just so happens that they're always bumping heads. Sonny wins some and Butchie wins some.

J.B.: Was labor any influence in that?

O'Keefe: No. I mean labor influence did not raise workmen's comp. What raised workmen's comp was because it needed so badly to be raised it was ridiculous the way it was. Sonny Meredith was probably single-handedly responsible. He was chairman of the sub-committee that handled the bill. The labor connection in itself wasn't of any significance.

W.D.V.: You want to end up in the Congress?

O'Keefe: I don't know. Probably stay here a while.

W.D.V.: Governor's office?

O'Keefe: Oh, no. I couldn't get elected. They'd never elect a liberal, Catholic southern Mississippian to the governorship.

W.D.V.: I think we ought to take that bet. Ever?

O'Keefe: Ever. I don't know. I have a peculiar philosophy. Looking at what Nixon did and looking at what people like Huey Long did--  
[End of tape. End of interview.]