

This is an interview with William E. Brock, United States Senator from Tennessee. The interview was conducted by Jack Bass on February 1, 1974. The interview was transcribed by Susan Hathaway.

JACK BASS: One of the striking things about Tennessee is that the Republican party seems at this time, to be the dominant party, can you explain to us why that is so?

BILL BROCK: Well I think it would be stretching the situation to say that Republicanism is now dominant in Tennessee. It is true that we hold the major statewide elective offices and the majority of the Congressional delegation, and that we have almost a majority of the legislature which is in . . . runs in great contrast with any other southern state, but maybe it depends on how you define the party. That is a matter of changing opinions these days, . . . any survey that you would run in the state asking party preference, the Democrats would still maintain a considerable lead over the Republican party. We don't register by party so it is a little difficult to pin it down exactly, but I would imagine that you would get a pretty good indication of relative party strength in the gubernatorial primary this year, and that the Democrats will vote at least 400,000 in their primary this year, maybe more and I

would be very surprised if our vote exceeded 300,000, as a matter of fact, I would expect it to be less than that, but it may increase if some other people get into the race that we don't see in it at the moment. If I had to break the state out, I would probably put it about 40% Democrat, 30% Republican, and 30% independent. An awful lot of the independents are recent vintage Democrats, but they haven't formally associated themselves with the Republican party and that is a pretty fluid group that can go back and forth depending on the perception of the candidates of the party. If you want to look at why we have come as far as we have from that premise, I think there are three or four ingredients in the success. First of all we started probably earlier than other states in developing our organization at the precinct level. We've been very effective in the metropolitan area, and that is where our growth has come.

J.B.: When did you begin?

B.B.: Well, we really began well, lightly in 1952. Then four years of lay off, a little more effort organizationally . . . now I am talking in '56. Again a four year lay off, no major contested races other than the Presidential races. In 1960, again a slightly heavier application, and in '62 we organized the third district which is Chattanooga and the ninth district at that time which was Memphis down to the precinct level in a very thorough fashion. We had what I consider

to be a good precinct organization in 1962, and that is something you can't say for many southern states, and you could not say in any other part of Tennessee. By good organization, I would define that to mean at least one worker for every 100 voters in the precincts, and that is a productive percentage, that is the breaking point which you begin to get real results. Secondly,
. . .

J.B.: Can we go back to that just a minute. What would these workers do?

B.B.: They did what is classic to precinct politics. They went door to door. First, identifying their neighbors as to their political leanings. Not by party but by preference for candidates by philosophy. Having identified them, they would work in conjunction with our headquarters to develop a list of what we call our RDI list . . . Republican, Democratic, Independent, even though a person was not by his own label a Republican, if he was going to vote for a Republican on a ballot we categorized him as such. Having the list of firm voters for us, firm voters against us, then we could concentrate in the few weeks between then and the election on talking to those people who were in the so called independent or undecided category, presenting them with issues that were meaningful to them, to which our candidate was responsive. Having done that prior to election day, the standard formula was to work with the headquarters to develop a list of those voters who we felt would generally support our candidates by precinct, by street number sequence with

telephones. The lists were distributed to precinct workers at the polls and as they voted they were checked off and periodically throughout the day those who had not voted, the list would be sent down to headquarters or to the precinct chairman who would either call them up or go see them and see if we could encourage them to vote.

J.B.: What was your role in helping to set up that organization?

B.B.: Well I was active in a number of capacities. I worked first of all as the chairman of our poll watcher organization to work on vote fraud. That is what first got me excited about politics when I saw the enormous amount of vote theft that went on. It irritated me, I was not at that time a Republican, but I was working with the Republicans in support of Eisenhower. I went from there into finance and at the same time into young Republican activities. I never had a title directly in the precinct organization, but there were five or six of us who coordinated the precinct organization effort in, you know, and solicited people to either be precinct chairman or to be a coordinator of a number of precincts. So it was principally in the organizational area. I was also, in 1961, Chairman of our Candidate Committee to encourage people to run for office. I was so successful that I ran myself. As a matter of fact, unsuccessful because the candidate that we had decided in December not to run, and people said you have been asking us to run, you can't ask somebody to

do something you are not willing to do yourself, so, I became a candidate and obviously was elected.

WALTER DEVRIES: Why did you do this in Tennessee, and other southern can't organize and can't get the candidates. They argue that

B.B.: The thing that is wrong with the Republican party is that it starts at the top, that is endemic to the southern Republican movement, and is the reason to me that it has not been as successful as it should have been and could have been. The climate is there in the South for Republican dominance, there is no question about that. The vote is there, the philosophy, the emotional attachment to the ideology is there, but the Republican party in the South has had a couple of hang ups; number one, in some areas it has had a racial hang up. They either felt like they had to try to out shop the Democrats on the racial issues, or at least take a similar stance, which I think is very short sighted, and I think you are building your foundation on a footing of clay. Race is not the issue to build either a party or a state, and if the Republican party has something to offer the state, it is in its ability to organize for economic growth, more jobs, more opportunity for some new ideas, more aggressive leadership . . .

W.D.: Tennessee Republican leadership?

B.B.: In that particular issue we tried and have tried to stay very far away from it and talk more

about the issues that have more of an economic type, jobs, job opportunities, education, that sort of thing, training, vocational work . . . these are things that people can identify with that benefit black and white alike and frankly when you benefit blacks, that means that everybody benefits because the economic base is eroded by the disadvantage that blacks suffer under today. But let me take you to the second impediment to southern growth as far as I am concerned, that is what you mentioned earlier, the tendency to always go for the top shot. Republicans come out of a different field down South than they do in the rest of the country. For a hundred years they were unable to win any local offices, any Mayors, Governorships, Congressional offices, and the only experience they had with politics came when a Republican President was in power, and when that happened, all of a sudden you opened up a cornecopia because the national party would contact the state chairman or the county chairman to find out who should be named the Postmaster. All of a sudden they found out that it was nice to be able to name a rural route carrier or a letter carrier or some postal worker, or maybe even the Postmaster himself. In other words, it was a Post Office politics. It was a Presidential political system, and that sort of skewed their view of the political process out

of line what it should have been in my personal opinion. It made them enormously interested in patronage, and so they go, I think, too many times as a result for the patronage offices, and that really is the Governorship . . . that is the big name and that is the guy who hires 30,000 or 40,000 people in the state, and they think if they can elect a Governor of ex-state, they can fire 30,000 Democrats and hire 30,000 Republicans. Obviously you couldn't do that no matter who the Governor was. That seems to be almost the political approach. We just felt like, in Tennessee, that . . . that the philosophy was more important than anything else. We were fighting for representation and to do that we had to build a foundation. We felt it was going to take us ten years to take the state of Tennessee. So in 1965 six of us sat down and drew up a ten year plan of how we would go about achieving the plan. We set up targets, the number of legislators by county, the number of state senators, the number of congressmen and the number of alternate senators and of course the Governorship. We met all of those objectives exactly on target, as a matter of fact, we were slightly ahead.

J.B.: Who was in the group?

B.B.: Just primarily the young Republicans, the leadership of the young Republicans in Chattanooga, and a similar thing was happening in Memphis, although

we didn't know it at the time. Within that same year we were in contact with them and working with them and merged our objectives.

J.B.: The reason I would like you to name some of these people is that when we go to Tennessee . . . these are the kind of people we would really like to talk to . . . and usually before that period the differences of opinion and the differences of perspective. If you talk to the people who were in it from the beginning you begin to understand . . .

B.B.: All right. One of the people you should talk to, there are several names that come to mind . . . in Memphis for example, Bob James, was one of the very early people and one of the leaders, Louis Donaldson was another attorney there. We can give you those addresses if you want them. I think that would give you a good starting point. Maybe they would be better able to suggest who was in that inner-group in Memphis at the same time. In Cattanooga, our group included Ross Walker, Bill Carter, again we can give you the names . . . John Curtis, well, that is probably enough for a starter. Maybe you'd do better to ask them too, rather than me giving you a complete list.

J.B.: What was the role of Senator Baker's campaign?

B.B.: What was the role of it? I am not sure what you mean.

J.B.: Where did it fit into the Republican role?

B.B.: Well it was premature. It was out of schedule. You see, we obviously couldn't anticipate the death of Estes Kefauver, and what happened in . . . well, I won in 1962 and that was the first breakthrough. We started electing legislators that year as well in Memphis and in Chattanooga. In 1964 when the Kefauver seat came up as a result of his death, and Ross Bass had been the Democratic candidate, Howard Baker, I think his father had just recently died, and he decided to run for it. He was the only Republican really with enormous identification in East Tennessee. The name was not too well known in the rest of the state, but it was sufficiently well known to get him a base. Howard made the effort and lost, but in doing that, together with the Goldwater candidacy, and I am not so sure that I wouldn't give more credit to Goldwater in this sense than I would to Baker Goldwater brought out a new element in politics in those areas that we were not working like Nashville, and Jackson, Tennessee and Shelbyville and Murfreesboro. Goldwater motivated people to work in politics that have never been involved before. The combination of the Goldwater candidacy, even though he lost, in Tennessee, and lost handily, and the Baker candidacy, for the first time gave us a cohesive state-wide network of people that were all in the same area and with a common goal. So, in '66 when the seat came up again, Howard was a

runaway winner in the primary and the organization was in a place then to go ahead and win. You have got to remember that it was just not Howard Baker that ran, Dan Kirkendall was also a candidate state-wide for the other seat, and when he lost in the house in '64 . . . I mean the Senate race in '64, he immediately went back to work and having established his name, went back to work to carry the Memphis district in '66. So, what we began to put together in the '62, '64, '66 period was what had to be done to make Tennessee a Republican state and that was to unite the conservative West Tennessee vote with the traditional East Tennessee Republican vote. Having that, with Dan Kirkendall taking Memphis, and my adding the Chattanooga seat, then we could add those two basis to the East Tennessee classic vote, and were in a position to carry the state wide race for Howard Baker and from then on in of course it has been all up hill in the sense of making progress, not in the sense of getting more difficult, but more workable. It's . . . we now come to the point, you see, we have grown so fast that we have sopped up the youth base of the Democrat party, because we get most of the young peoples votes . . . we have sopped up the business part of their vote, because that no longer is identifying itself with that community . . . we have a far more effective women's organization, and the fact that women have a bigger

voice in our campaign, attracts other women to our campaigns who might not ideologically come in just for that one reason. So what is happening is that as we grow, we are eroding the more responsible base of the old Democrat party and responsible in Tennessee terms. That means that in a primary in the Democratic party today, it becomes very difficult for a moderate or conservative Democrat to get the nomination, and the more difficult it becomes, the more that enhances our appeal to the moderates in Tennessee, the more it assists us in continuing the rolling process of taking the dominant role in the state. We are not there yet, and we are fully capable of blowing everything we have done by nominating somebody that would not have appeal.

W.D.: In the past 14 years when you built the party, were there any inter-party conflicts or fights?

B.B.: To a degree. You always have that. Fortunately our conflicts have been minimal as compared with the Democrats because ours are not traumatic and ours are more power conflicts or personality conflicts rather than ideological. We don't have the split. The Democrats have the split between the traditional old guard conservative Democrat and the new guard very liberal Democrat. We don't have to face that. Our problems have been something that usually are temporary. We may have a personality difficulty, but they are resolvable.

For example, when I first ran in '62, the party did not particularly want me as its candidate, and they were quite frank to say so, the leadership of the party, and here I was upsetting the apple cart. They had in some of my counties a good deal going. The Democrats never bothered them, and let them elect a Republican, and they got the patronage when we had a Republican President. Conversely, they never ran a candidate against the Democrats for the Congress. So, if there are other offices that may have been of more consequence to the Democrats, so I had a good deal of resistance on my own candidacy. Yet, as soon as I won, it disappeared very quickly. In '64 we had a light disagreement between the East Tennessee Republicans, which were in the classic Republican mold, and the rest of the state which was Barry Goldwater country. It was a very conservative kind of Republicanism, and ideologically oriented. The East Tennessee Republicans were not *[in support of]* of the Goldwater candidacy at least in general, some of them were, but the great percent were not, and they were concerned that Goldwater would lose, and they were right as it turned out. In '66 when Howard Baker won, quite honestly there was . . . within the next two years there was a growing sense of frustration on the part of the . . . some of my supporters with the Baker group who were not at least in the view of some of our supporters, not really exercising a great deal of leadership with the Republican party. I think probably

that was complicated by a little personal jealousy on the part of people who felt like I had started the thing. You know, they had been with me through thick and thin and they felt like our organization should be the dominant organization in Tennessee, and obviously the Baker people would resent that, and there group up out of that a condition that lasted for probably two or three years, no more than that, of tension between the so called Baker organization and the Brock organization.

W.D.: Does personality

B.B.: No, there was no ideology there. In '70, the whole matter was resolved because Howard Baker came in and worked for me all across the state. I think he demonstrated his own sense of integrity and Howard and I became about then pretty good personal friends. We had a better chance to start working together, and both of us had discussed over those three years how we could resolve the problem. We never really suffered from it between the two of us, but it was exasapated by some of our supporters . . . mostly by the press frankly, they were trying to seize upon it as something to talk about. By '70 though, his activities in support of my candidacy had pretty well eliminated the fears my people had of any difference between the two of us, and in turn I think we have . . . we took care of the other half of the problem in '72, when I came in to stomp

for him. People now believe us when we say we are friends. They have seen it work. There is just no further conflict, but now there is some tension between the Governor's supporters and mine, and that is not unhealthy as long as you understand it for what it is, and as long as you keep it in the confines of honest and constructive disagreement, and then it does not become debilitating or mean.

W.D.: Within the states politics, how would you describe yourself as a moderate, a conservative?

B.B.: Those terms don't mean anything.

Unident: I hate to rush you . . .

W.D.: Where do you see yourself as compared with the other Republicans in the South?

B.B.: I don't think . . . I don't like one word definitions, I really don't. I think they are terribly misleading and subject to a lot of misconstruction. I think there is too much of a tendency to . . . on the part of liberals to think of conservative as being primary a racist philosophy or a straight law and order philosophy. I think there is too much Tennessee and Republican conservatives to look upon liberals as total centralists and authoritarians in the sense of governmental control, or big spenders. Neither is really fair. But to the extent that they do apply, I would be somewhat less conservative than Ed Gurney or John Tower, and Jesse Helms . . . perhaps more so in an economic sense than Howard Baker, but there are

just not many times that he and I disagree. We are pretty close on most issues. This year, for once the ADA rated me higher than him, but what is the difference between ten and twenty percent. I mean that is a ridiculous thing to contrast anyway. I don't like labels simply because I think politics . . . if it gets to heavily polarized, and I think there is a danger of that today, is going to get more frustrating for the American people, not less. Once you have when they are posed with a choice between a Goldwater and a McGovern, there is no choice for the majority. I think there is an enormous sense of frustration in this country today because they do lack an adequate range of selection, and that is why I am opposed to a conservative party and a liberal party.

W.D.: The reason I asked you that is when you Republicans in the South, which direction the party should go. In order *[to win, they say]* they have to be more conservative than the Democrats, this is in essence trying to pick up the disgruntled conservative Democrat.

B.B.: I think that is true as long as conservatism is a positive philosophy rather than a reactionary one. There is a tendency to mix the words reactionary and conservative, and there is a tendency to mix the philosophies. If conservatism means economic rationalization in terms of spending. If conservatism means an

extension of personal freedom, less infringement on the part of government over a human life, that is something that sells very well in the South, but as I tried to say earlier, if you try to extend then from that conservatism into a repression of a particular segment of the community, more law and order over the black community, for example, less economic opportunity for the black community, that philosophy is so unworkable, if you can call it a philosophy, that it not only is going to lose the black vote, which we don't have much of anyway, but it is going to drive off whites that simply cannot accept it. Frankly, our base is in maybe economically conservative, but in socially moderate community, and that is where we are going to make growth . . . make gains to the extent that we do in the South. We have so much more to offer them than the Democrats do, but the Democrats that have been in office too long are reactionary, they are out of date, they are out of touch, and the thing the Republican party can do is to bring a freshness to the political process, some new ideas some creativity. If it doesn't do that it is wasting its effort. It is not responding to a demonstrated need . . . I could go for quite a while on this, but I feel very strongly that the Republicans are in an exquisite position right now to be responsive to a huge hunger on the part of the South for more honest representation. They can run right in between the

hyperconservative Democrat, who is still out screaming about the blacks who are taking over on one side, and the hyperliberal Democrat who may be the new wave, who is trying to buy the Kennedy line on the left side of the spectrum. The Republican for come right in between those two, split the two polls, and I think reflect and respond to a majority of the people in the South very effectively and to the advantage of both the party and the state.

W.D.: Do you think they are doing that outside your own state?

B.B.: Not sufficiently, no, I do not.

J.B.: In talking with Republicans throughout the South we find that most of them tell us Watergate is not hurting the party insofar as fund raising is concerned, it is not causing the Republicans to lose any members, maybe they are not gaining as many, but that it is hurting insofar as candidates. Do you find that true in Tennessee and generally throughout the South? How do you see the effect of Watergate at this point unresolved . . .

B.B.: Yeah, it is unresolved. I think people are misreading the effect of Watergate, both Republicans and Democrats. I think Watergate has collared the viewpoint of the American people towards the Republican party. It may not be fair, but it is a fact that it has damaged us and damaged us enormously. It will tend to make people who would be in that group swinging away from the Democrats and the Republicans, it would tend

to make them stop and remain independent, that weakens your structure. It weakens your ability to organize, and to develop a viable party base. It may have some effect on candidacies, although in my own experience in the Senate campaign job, I have not seen it on a national basis. We have more good candidates frankly than I had expected before Watergate even occurred, and I am excited about that. It has not diminished our opportunity to get candidates in Tennessee to my knowledge. I think people are almost operating with a split mind on the subject. Our candidates say well "I'm not going to let Watergate effect my candidacy, I want to run this year, and I think I can win, and I want to do it by knocking on so many doors or getting such and such an organization put together, whatever happens to the President, I can run a campaign for the state legislature and I can win." I think there is every reason to believe that a good percent of them can. If I had to foresee an effect of Watergate in political terms, I think it will have greater consequence on the House of Representatives than it will at the state level with legislatures or Governors and certainly greater than it will with the Senate. I am not sure I know why but that is what I feel anyway.

W.D.: In that 25 years, obviously the growth of the Republican party is one of the major changes that occurred in that area. Did anything else occur in that era that comes to mind . . .

B.B.: In the South?

W.D.: In your state?

B.B.: Probably more than almost anything else is the changing nature of the economic condition. The tendency for the South to outgrow the rest of the country in terms of jobs, in terms of wages, in terms of profits, in terms of sales, every possible economic measure we have been uniquely fortunate. That has created an enormous social change. The of the suburb, the shift from farm to city. . . notice one thing about the South, and it is true, I am sure you all know it better than I, but it is true not only in Tennessee, but I think almost without exception in every southern state, where we have been successful has been in the cities and the suburbs. Where we have not been successful has been in the rural areas. The rural patterns are enormously difficult to change. It is very difficult to communicate with the rural constituencies. It is very difficult to organize it in the sense that we go door to door in the city of Chattanooga and Memphis. So, while we picked up one or two rural seats in the South, virtually all of our successes have been in Atlanta, Chattanooga and Memphis, and Charlotte, and you know, places like that, and that is a factor of the changing economic pattern down there and the fact when people move they become subject to different interests, different pressures, and certainly different educational inputs in the sense of the way we communicate the American political process. We will ultimately take the rural South as Republicans, but that remains, I think, as much as ten years off. It

just takes that much longer to communicate and to change old habits and labels, and people are just that much more resistant to change in that kind of a setting. But I think to me that would be the largest single thing. You must crank in. Obviously the effect of the '54 decision, Brown versus the Board of Education and its impact on southern education, southern sociology, southern institutions, and southern attitudes. It was a very healthy thing for the South to have to face up to something that it should have faced up to a long time ago. It made us get honest with ourselves, and we are not through with that process yet, but we have made enormous progress, and that, I think, has been a very constructive part of the change, a very good part.

J.B.: Senator, we found basically five groups, and we think at least five different categories of Republicans in the South . . .

B.B.: I am surprised you can limit it to that.

J.B.: . . . And one you can add to that if you think we need to. I wonder if you could summarize how you feel that the relevance *of each* group is in Tennessee. One, you have the mountain traditional Republican. Two, you've got the urban Republican . . . urban suburban Republican who are basically native to the South, who are basically economically conservative. Three, you have got another basically urban suburban Republican of people who have moved into the South, who are Republicans from other states, have migrated into the South. Four, you've got what is usually a much

smaller group of people who are reacting to basically a reform element and reacted and drawn the Republican party in opposition to what they perceive to be entrenched Democratic machines that they felt were in need of governmental reform. Fifth, you have a group that is basically racial conservative. Many of whom were brought in in '64 with the Goldwater movement. How would you summarize the relevent strength of such groups in Tennessee?

B.B.: I guess, you are going to have to blend it some because, for example, even looking at my own instance I would fit into categories two and four. But probably the Eastern traditional Republican is dominant in primary terms in the party, but that is a diminishing influence and is being rapidly overtaken by the number two group, the suburban Republicans complimented by the ones that have moved south that were Republicans, but it is essentially, I'd say the overwhelming majority is composed of native southerners who are the suburban ethic who have gotten active because of their economic philosophy. That group is achieving rapid dominance and . . . maybe not in primaries but in general elections it is more important, I think maybe then even the traditional base. In diminishing order of importance . . . what was the third group, that was the ones that had moved South?

J.B.: Right, The Republicans that have moved South.

B.B.: And what was the fourth?

J.B.: Withdrawing the Republican party in reaction to . . .

B.B.: I think you have almost got them in the correct sequence. First the traditional, second the economic conservative in the suburban . . . primarily he is a young . . . these are younger people primarily in the business community.

W.D.: But who were Democrats.

B.B.: Most of them were Democrats just as I was, yeah.

J.B.: And the fifth group of racial conservatives also tend to be very much conservative than Republicans.

B.B.: Yeah, but they are conservative in a hyper sense in a lot of things besides race. They tend to be rabbit on the subject of abortion, they tend to be rabbit on the subject of law and order . . . you know the entire range of and things of that sort. I think I would sequence them from one to five just as you have got them arranged in that order of importance as a composite of the entire state. Now, to try to pull it into a little more prespective, your racial factor might move up a notch in the rural areas for the period of '64 to '70 maybe '72, but that is falling off rapidly now, and is not the factor that it was in my state five years ago by a long site.

J.B.: Senator Thurmond

B.B.: You have got one minute to go so . . .

(End interview with Senator William Brock.)