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This is an interview with Al Beguard in Lafayette, Louisiana on January 13, 1974. The interview was conducted by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries and was transcribed by Susan Hathaway.

AL BEGUARD: . . . he was the man with the money, the man with the education both. He would give his opinion to the farmers when it was rural. This was even true in state politics, the representatives and what have you. You go back over the state senators and the state representatives from this area and you'll have the Bonines, the Gerards, French names, and the ones now, our state senator from this area is still Mouton, which is French. But one of the representatives is Barez, which, I don't know what the origin is but the other one is Thompson. So the people are going, it has become much more homogeneous. I think one of the reasons probably is the oil industry in this area. The people came in from Texas and Arkansas and what have you, plus the population as a whole is probably better educated. It has become more urbanized and so the whole thing is changing somewhat. They can't control it the way they used to. It used to be that you would go to the head of a family or to one of the local gentry and you

had the whole thing, you had fifty or sixty votes. You still have that somewhat. It used to be, I guess, at least what I have read, sort of the ward healer-type politics out in the rural areas at least. One of our state representatives, Crissland, who is also on the faculty here, he is a geography teacher. He decided to run last time. He represents part of the city that is, well, probably the less affluent part of the city. With a name like Crissland, most of the people over there are probably of French descent. But he conducted a very personal campaign, door to door. It worked, he got elected. His big thing in the state legislature is prestige license plates. He is a license plate collector. So, he got a prestigious license plate. It is weird. And of course, everybody has told you, I guess, that the Governor is from Crowley, which is down the road, the first one in a hell of a long time from this area of the state. Well, Huey broke the whole thing. Huey was from Wenfield, and just about all the other Governors were Huey people, people he supported, or people from north of Alexandria, and getting from Columbia, Sam Jones from Lake Charles, he was a reform Governor. But then, yet, people like Dick Lusch who was from New Orleans, but he was put in by the Huey people and when Earl died that whole

thing probably stopped, and Edwards this time, the South unified. New Orleans went with this area of the state. They elected Edwards, but Shep Morrison, who was the mayor of New Orleans, tried a couple of times but never did make it.

WALTER DEVRIES: Some argue that the '71 primary indicates a shifting of power from the North to the South. Now that the South was able to coalesce for the first time, that this may be the trend of the future. How does that strike you?

Begnaud: I think it will probably. But it will depend on the sort of job that Edwards does. I think if it is the *shift* to the South, but not to the New Orleans South. It will be someone from outside of New Orleans from the southern part of the state, with New Orleans going with them.

W.D.: Do you think the anti-New Orleans bias is still there?

Begnaud: I think it still is, yes.

J.B.: Did this flip before in the South when you had southern candidates, all of whom were from New Orleans, was an anti-urban bias?

Begnaud: New Orleans was the city. In fact, we got one of the local weather man, when the TV station goes around and says, "The temperature in Shreveport is 40° in Monroe is 45°, Lake Charles 50°, Lafayette, 60°, Baton Rouge 75° and the city is 60°." If you get a chance it is on Channel 3, one of the ABC affiliates here. They have a

weather man by the name of Leonard Faulker who is local evidently. But when he gets to New Orleans, it is "The city." He doesn't say New Orleans, he says, "The city."

J.B.: What distinctive features remain of *Louisiana* politics?

Begnaud: I think the personal contact is still there, in the rural areas it is still "What can you do for me? Can you dig my ditches, drain my farm, blacktop my road." It is sort of a patronage thing in the rural areas. There also is, I think, a certain amount of ethnic feeling. If you have a candidate running, if his name is Mouton and the other is Jones or something, a lot of people will vote for the Mouton rather than the Jones because Mouton is obviously French. But I think this is especially true in the rural areas. I live out in the country about ten miles from here. It is rural, pure rural, and in that area it will be. If there is a Jones and a Mouton, they will probably go for the Mouton. So that still is the feeling of unity among the French rural areas at least. In this city I think it is breaking down, and like I told you, one of the representatives Thompson, who represents the area I live in as a representative, but most of the votes are in the city. I think that does make a difference. I think the real French feeling is still in the rural areas, but I think it is breaking down in the cities.

W.D.: Do you think that has been changing in the last 25 years? When did the change really start?

Begnaud: The last ten, probably more so. Because up until

this time, representatives, for example, Mouton was our state senator, he'd been in quite a while, but the representative was a guy named Bertrang, which is French, and his family is switching over to Thompson. So I would say that within the last ten years this has changed quite a bit on the local level.

W.D.: You mentioned the movement by the oil industry. Is there anything else that . . .

Begnaud: I think education is the largest thing. I am getting very personal, my father has a grade school education. He is 68, I think. A lot of people of his age group have that much or less. Therefore, anyone who had more sort of stuck out. It was just not normal. The people who are now, I guess, in their fifties . . . we still have a lot of people here where their highest ambition for their kids is to get them out of high school. If they can finish high school, they figure this is it. This has been changing some, but you have a heck of a lot more kids now with a high school education than you have with college degrees. I think that as the educational base broadens, then they become aware of what is happening in the rest of the state and the nation and what have you and the issues change. They don't vote for a man because he is French or because he will black top that road, if he is not the best candidate. So I think the educational system. And again, but this is also connected to the oil industries. A lot of the farmers around the area have leased out land, and the oil companies have built oil wells, which

brings in money, which gives the money to be able to afford to send their kids to college. So it is economic as well as educational. I think the two combined have got to be, at least in this area.

W.D.: What is the role of the church?

Begnaud: I am a bad one to ask that question to. I really don't know. I don't think it is very powerful on the local level. I think religion plays some role here, but I think religion will play a bigger role north of Alexandria than it will here. North of Alexandria, see, is primarily Anglo-Saxon Protestant. This area, of course, is Roman Catholic. But I think religion plays a stronger role in the northern part of the state than it plays in the southern part of the state. That, undoubtedly, is one of the reasons why Shep Morrison made Mayor of New Orleans. Not only was he from New Orleans, but he was smooth, he was urbane and he was a Roman Catholic. Edwards is the first Catholic that we have had in a long long time. But the prejudice in north Louisiana has been more anti-Catholic than southern Louisiana has been anti-Protestant. They wouldn't vote for a man just because he is Roman Catholic. But I think in some places in north Louisiana they would vote against a man because he is Roman Catholic. So I don't think the church plays that much of a role in this specific area when it comes to local candidates.

W.D.: It doesn't get involved in primaries?

Begnaud: Not really, not on the local level. On the state level, for example, they lobby for things like abortion, which you would expect and they do have a lot of influence there because you have the people who are very religious, who are very anti-abortion, who will write letters and things like that. But in primaries, I don't think it plays any role in this area, very little if any.

J.B.: What has been the effect of the Voting Rights Act on the state?

Begnaud: Oh, probably all of the politicians have become a little more liberal on race, but there never was this much of a racist attitude. It was racist, sort of de facto, everything else was racist. But the debating which went on in many places, not that much, it was more of a personal thing. For example, these are stories, but one of the neighboring parishes when some of the first blacks went to register, before the voting acts when it first started up, Earl Long was in office. They would prevent them from registering. But then on a state level it was very moderate and so they began to let them register and it sort of became accepted. It is not race-baiting as you hear it in some places. It never has been, I don't think, in this state. The blacks voted for Earl Long primarily because it was economical for welfare and what have you. The same reason they went for McKeffen, I think, in a big way. For the same reason they go for Morrison, he is a

New Orleans urban and they thought he was more liberal. They went for Edwards this time, and one of the guys running against him, Gillis Long, who is one of the kinsman of the Earl and Huey era. So it has liberalized somewhat and Edwards may just be the most liberal one who ran in that last election. He and Gillis were probably the two most liberal. But if the blacks put up one of their candidates and they pulled behind him, they were successful in taking quite a few of the New Orleans vote. I think Gillis Long probably got more than Edwards in the first primary, more of the black vote. But when the run-off came in Gillis swung whatever support he could to Edwards and the blacks just about went to Edwards in droves. But Bennett Johnson again was Shreveport. He is a U. S. Senator now, but when he was running for Governor he was from north Louisiana. North Louisiana has the reputation, whether it is right or not, of being anti-black to a large extent. So I think it has made a . . . Andrew has a lot of blacks on his staff and Edwards has a black Executive Secretary, or something like that. I think that within the next ten years, New Orleans will have a black mayor. It has changed them. They pay attention to them now. Whereas before then, they may have gotten some of the benefits but it was a side thing, Earl Long and his welfare programs, old age assistance, charity hospitals and what have you, help the blacks. But

not because they were black, it was an economic program.

J.B.: The charity hospitals, is that a state-wide . . .

Begnaud: They've got the big one down in *New Orleans*
They've got one in Lafayette. They had one in Lake Charles,
I think they closed it. They've got Shreveport, Confederate
Memorial Hospital. They have got them in most of the major
cities. [Interruption]

W.D.: When you talk to people about Louisiana, ~~and~~
special politics, *what kind* of politics? ^{→?} You have identified
several characteristics of the thing. You say that in the
rural areas it is kind of family oriented with large families.
It reminds me of the old Branch Head boys in North Carolina.
It is oriented towards patronage in the sense of what can
you do in terms of the certain kinds of governmental
services. Perhaps there is a religious thing, the Roman
Catholicism and French descent. Now are those the basic
characteristics that you think about when you think of Cajun
politics?

Begnaud: I think so. It is sort of a circus atmosphere,
barbecues, they have them all over. But I think they may
play a special role here. For example, a candidate for
Governor or anything else will go to one of the local
night clubs where they have the French music, and the French
singing and everything else is in French. On some Saturday
nights they will have a big barbecue and generally the owner
of the establishment will provide the barbecue. A couple of

his supporters will get together to get the beef or what have you and give it to this man and he will cook the barbecue and have a giant political rally. There is also a dance or something that same night. People play the French accordian, and the people go there and drink and dance and eat barbecue and then the man gets up sometime during the evening and makes a speech. I think that may play a bigger role in this area than it does in some other parts.

W.D.: So the old traditions ~~are~~ ¹ [Interruption] are more important here than they might be otherwise.

Begnaud: I think so.

W.D.: And it kind of adds an entertainment flavor to it.

Begnaud: Has an entertainment flavor to it and it also is a personal sort of thing. This man cares enough to come to our place because I think that still is, especially among the older people, sort of unique. They are French and the rest of the country is American. You still hear some of the older people, for example, if you came over and met my father, a lot of this is pure . . . , but if you came over and met my father, he can not speak French. When you leave and someone else comes over, he will tell them that you came to the house and he will say "He is an American," which means that you are not French. My wife can't speak French and my whole family because I am from this area. I married an

American as contrasted to the French.

W.D.: It is still strong.

Begnaud: I don't know how really strong it is. It is still used, but it is used primarily by the people in their fifties and sixties, who still lead the generation. The generation gap here is probably bigger not in the same sense that it is nation-wide, but the gap between myself and my father on the way we look at things is a tremendous gap. But my wife is an American. If you came you would be an American because you cannot speak French. Your name is not French, and that whole generation of his is just about the same way.

W.D.: When they pass, what then?

Begnaud: Oh, I think that way of life is gone. I don't make the distinction anymore. Now some people in my age group probably still make it, those who say, have more limited education. My brother-in-law who is younger than I am, probably still uses it some. "This is an American" as contrasted to the Cajuns around here. So it'll probably be another . . . now his children probably won't, but it will be another 15, 20, 30 years maybe, before this thing disappears completely if it ever does.

W.D.: Well, in addition to the Cajun politics, you hear about corruption in Louisiana, and a lot of people attribute that to several things. One is the so-called

Latin temperament, the second thing is the fact that they suggest that politics is seen as entertainment or a sporting event, or a series of events.

Begnaud: I view that, now that is what I see in myself. My wife and I have great big arguments about it. For example, I built my home and I've got the driveway going to the road. Well I called, my father called somebody, we called a police juror, who is the local governing body, and asked them to come in and build a little road. My driveway is what it amounts to. He came in with his road machine and dug the ditches, built it up, and came in and put a load of shell on it. Now this is public property, really public money which he is putting on my driveway, which I saw nothing wrong with, because I had seen it all my life. He called me up and he wanted me to vote for him, okay, it's his turn now. So he comes in, he'll dig my ditches, put shell on my driveway and I'll vote for him probably next time around. This is the way they operate. This is what I was talking about. It is local, it is patronage. This man did a favor for me, using tax money is what it amounts to, therefore, I'll vote for him next time. My wife can not abide it. She absolutely detests it.

W.D.: How did she see it?

Begnaud: This is public money, our tax money, it should be used on roads, not doing favors for . . . if you go back through some of the newspapers you see some of the battles

that have been taking place even today, and this parish has gotten away from this a lot now, but this was about eight years ago, what he did for me. They are watching it much closer now. About a year ago, I think, my old man had some holes in his driveway, and he called the guy up and the guy said, "I can't, they are watching us. We can't do it anymore." So they were hauling shell for some other road, they were going to hard surface and one of the guys made a detour and came in and dropped in on the old man's drive way. It is very personal.

W.D.: It has developed a kind of a tolerance on the local level, but does it develop a similar kind of tolerance on the state level?

Begnaud: I think so. I think because of this happening on a local level . . .

W.D.: Is that a feature of the South, is that unique of the South, or do you have that in the northern part of the state as well?

Begnaud: I don't know about the northern part.

W.D.: But it is characteristic of the southern parishes?

Begnaud: It is characteristic here. But again, this is one of those things that is going out of style. They are not doing it anymore because you have different people. Again, [Interruption]

Begin Side Two, Tape One

J.B.: So the question is one of degree as long as it gets into large and that is a subjective thing.

Begnaud: It is. It is completely subjective, but this was something expected.

J.B.: Does this also apply to . . .

W.D.: the election?

Begnaud: What I am talking about right now. This guy, I don't know, I think he has limited education, less than high school. He has been a police juror now for a number of years and this is the way he stays in office. His father was a fairly large land owner in the area and the people knew him. So this guy decided that he would go into politics and he must be 60 years old now. This is the way he stays in. The man who was the school board member from my area up until, I guess, four years ago was a man who used to drive a Sinclair kerosene truck. This was his job. He went to all the farmers and delivered kerosene before natural gas came in to a certain extent electricity and what have you. Everyone knew him, and he was an honest man. They put him on the school board, which was fine when he first got in, but he stayed in until he died, 20 or 25 years, something like that and the reason he stayed in was that everyone knew him. Now the school system had grown to a multi-million dollar school system. I think he has a fifth grade education, maybe, but they

kept electing him because they knew him because he had done favors for them.

W.D.: I am fascinated by this thing . . . say the revelation of Edwards' wife say while she was in Washington, her apartment rent was paid for by architects. How would you react to that?

Begnaud: Probably not. Unless there is a specific bill on which he is going to vote pertaining to that occupation, or to the architect or what have you, then I don't think I would react very strongly against it.

W.D.: Is that how you can explain how Edwards just kind of laughs those things off or brushes them off.

Begnaud: I think so.

J.B.: Is this part of just a general tolerance, a life in general tolerance towards . . .

Begnaud: I think so.

J.B.: Corruption up to a level.

Begnaud: I really think it is. I think this thing of being Latin, the Latin influence and the Catholic church to a certain extent, this sort of live and let live attitude that is here has been very good for race relations. We haven't had any Kent State's here. This University was integrated in 1954 before the Supreme Court decision came out. It was integrated under the old system of separate but equal. There was no black college within a 50 mile area. Therefore,

they made them come to school here. We really haven't had any racial trouble to speak of on this campus or in the community for that matter, and I think this live and let live attitude, a certain type of fatalism, it seems to me to a certain extent has been very good for race relations. It is bad for political morality.

J.B.: Getting back to the integration thing on the campus. Back in '54, who made that decision to let blacks in?

Begnaud: It was a state court, I believe. I've got the decision someplace in my files.

J.B.: It didn't upset people in the north even?

Begnaud: Yeah, it upset a lot of people in the northern part of the state and some people here. But not upset enough to stand in a school room door like Wallace did in Alabama. The whole campaign, Jimmy Davis, racism played a big part in the campaign of 1960 when Davis got elected against Morrison. Morrison was soft on the race issue. The man who had come in third was a guy by the name of Raynike, who was an out and out racist, and he threw his support to Davis and Davis saw which way the political wind was blowing so Davis became more and more of a racist and Davis got elected Governor. So it played in '60, and it played a part to a certain extent in '64, McKeithan used it some against Morrison when he ran. This time it didn't work against Edwards. We really had no out and out racist in this . . . maybe one of the minor candidates, but none of the

major candidates were racist. So this has changed state-wide. For a number of years Jimmy Davis, when he was in, called special sessions of the legislature all over the place. The legislature would enact laws and the courts would knock them out.

J.B.: What role does oil play politically here in terms of the money aspect of oil?

Begnaud: I really don't know. I can't say for fact. I have my own inclinations. I think they contribute a heck of a lot, but you'd have to ask, if you'd ask Senator Mouton, for example, and he could probably tell you. Crissland, who is from the campus, I don't think he got that much oil money. The donations are personal donations to a large extent. You have a number of people who contribute quite a bit of money and they will expect favors in return. But I don't think it plays that big a role, because oil is rather well protected in this state from all angles. They don't have to go out because it is the interest of the state and the interest of the people. If a bill comes up in the state legislature affecting the oil industry, the representative from Lafayette will vote in favor of the oil industry probably because it is so vital to our economic well-being. The same thing with Russell Long in the U. S. Senate. Russell has extensive oil holdings, I think. He will vote, he was one of those who helped kill that excess profits thing in the last session of the Congress. He says he has got oil holdings and

the oil industry is very important to this state, that there is no conflict of interest. This is the sort of thing that I was telling you about. Probably the French influence has sort of permeated some throughout the state, the tolerance for some amount of . . .

W.D.: Well, you know, extend that to campaigns . . .

[Interruption]

J.B.: The Governor appoints a Conservation Commissioner on the State Mineral Board.

Begnaud: Those two offices control the oil industry. They will control the lease, they control the oil allowable, how much can you pump out of your well, and these men are appointed by the Governor. Therefore, if the Governor wants, somebody wants money to run and he is a formidable candidate, and the oil industry does not donate, say one company, Texaco donates and the others do not, when he gets in office, if he changes the allowable of that company by 3% state-wide it would make a tremendous amount of difference. It would cost that company a tremendous amount of money. So out of sort of self protection, they will donate money. There also are numerous boards, people are appointed to levy boards and all sorts of boards and they get a per diem. Some of them want it for prestige, some of them want it, I guess, for some kind of corruption that goes on or what have you. But some of the candidates will sell the boards. If you contribute \$10,000 to my campaign, I will appoint you to the State Mental

Board. [Interruption]

J.B.: . . . the money in the campaign coming from oil interest applies to state-wide campaigns, and also local campaigns?

Begnaud: I don't think it plays that much in a local campaign, I really don't. This is pure impression, I have no facts to back it up.

J.B.: How about Congressional races?

Begnaud: I think in Congressional races quite a bit of it will be oil money, again for the depletion allowance and what have you, they will contribute.

J.B.: And to some extent oil is just where the money is anyway. So people who have money to give have it from oil to a certain extent.

Begnaud: To a very very large extent.

J.B.: I mean even if it comes through banking?

Begnaud: Yeah.

J.B.: Is there much connection, do you know, between oil, banking, insurance?

Begnaud: I don't know. [Interruption] . . . There is no way to say, to tell whether or not they will vote for you because it is the machine voting. But you pay the driver of the car and he will haul people for you to the polls. The one that I took part in the going rate was \$20. I gave him my \$20, and he could use his car. Now he may not have anybody to haul, but if I give him the \$20, he will use his car for that

day, he will go to the polls and he will vote for you, for those who are illiterate and can't read, they can't recognize numbers, they give them a little piece of paper, if a man is very illiterate or something, you give him yours. Every candidate has a number, my number was two. I'd give him yellow pieces of paper with a two on it to this driver who would be hauling these people. As they go into the voting booths, he gives them those tickets and they generally go into the voting booth and vote number two and walk out. That is the only thing they vote for. Then some of them form alliances, and they may give them² number and if the sheriff is number fifteen, then the Senator and Sheriff may get together and they give them two numbers and they go in and vote the numbers. Then the opposition may come around and give the driver more money, possibly give him tickets, same color, different numbers, and so when you go around checking your drivers, you just look on the black boards and see all these little yellow pieces of paper, you figure he's got all your numbers, but he has got yellow stickers with somebody else's number on it. It is a circus. [Interruption] Not really.

J.B.: How big of a factor is television?

Begnaud: A very big factor I think. I think it is not so much what the man says, but the fact that he has the money and the backing to get on there and say something. The same psychology that works for signs on a highway. It doesn't change that many votes, but when they see the man on the sign,

"This is their candidate," and it keeps the people he's got. And they will go up to others and see all these signs and what have you and I think it may influence that way.

J.B.: In effect it gives him credibility?

Begnaud: Yeah. And television for somebody who is unknown, I think, is very important. If he cannot get to see everybody, he will have his barbecues and what have you, but not every one is going to go. The only exposure they will have to this man will be on television, to a certain extent. It is probably becoming more and more important because the old way, these night clubs and these things, there are few of them left, they are going out. It just used to be that every little bird would have one, but they are getting fewer and fewer.

W.D.: Have a night club?

Begnaud: Yeah. The French night club where you have the French music and the French barbecue and what have you. There is one between here and my house which has been there quite a while. There used to be three or four ~~others~~ on the way to ~~through~~ the back ways, and a lot of those are closing. Because the people who go there are mostly the older people. So that is going out. It is changing, but it still is important I think. Well, TV, my wife really is not that interested. I take part in just about every campaign that comes along, and I will go to the barbecues and I will go to the others because I am interested,

and I am interested in a candidate, but she won't. So, the only exposure she will have to it is what I tell her, or else what she will hear the man say on television. It will influence her, but again, she is an American. I still want to feel the man out, I want to feel the flesh, I want to talk to him, I want to know him, and she is perfectly satisfied to sit and watch TV or read or what have you, and see what the man says, whether he has got things she will believe in and whether he wants to do things that she wants. We had in the last campaign, the one Edwards won back with Gillis Long. I got Gillis at home, and invited him, well the History Department and a couple of others to come over and have beer and little snacks and things. He talked to all the people there and what have you, but that is a lot of the type of thing. [Interruption]

J.B.: The kids look at Huey and the Long's as bunch of clowns and Huey as a dictator?

Begnaud: Yeah.

J.B.: But the older people don't.

Begnaud: The older people don't. The older people look at the economic benefits they brought.

J.B.: When they think of economic benefits what do they think of?

Begnaud: The roads, the bridges and mostly the state-owned text books.

J.B.: Are charity hospitals . . .

Begnaud: Charity hospitals to a large extent also. Part of that getting away from it may be the economic. People are much better off economically. When Huey did bring in those free text books, see that is the reason that a lot of these older people don't have the education is because they couldn't afford the text books and Huey comes in with the text books.

W.D.: Really?

Begnaud: Yeah. They could not afford the text books. People out in the rural areas could not afford to buy the text books to go to school. There was no money.

W.D.: We've heard this three or four times, what the significance of that was.

Begnaud: This is it.

J.B.: Was the cost that great?

Begnaud: I don't think the cost was that great. It was just that people didn't have it. I guess it is great when you don't have it. [Interruption] These older people to give their kids the education they were deprived of because of money. So the free text books . . .

J.B.: But the kids don't associate . . .

Begnaud: The kids don't understand it because they have had it all their life. Well, I had it all my life.

J.B.: You mean kids kind of think of Huey Long and that bunch as

Begnaud: Sort of. You know, here was a man who was a

dictator . . .

J.B.: How do they react, or do they read T. Harry Williams' book on Huey Long? How do they react to the book?

Begnaud: Well, see, Williams is another generation also. They figure he's too favorable to Long. We have got one guy on the faculty here who doesn't like Huey. I happen to like him very much because of the text books, really, because of the text books. If it hadn't been for that, I probably would not have gotten an education period. My old man . . . I was born in '33 and am 40 years old. That was the middle of the Depression. There is no way that I could have gone. So, if Huey Long were reincarnated and he ran, I'd vote for him, for that reason. I don't give a damn how many people he steps on. He didn't kill anybody. He ran Harding Cord out of the state, but that is another story. They look upon Huey *as a good governor*. When they think of Earl, they don't think of any of the benefits that Earl brought in, they think of Earl going through the West when he *was committed*. They brought him to the hospital in Texas, he got himself out and ~~went to~~ came back to Baton Rouge, they brought him to Mandenville. He fired the Director of Hospitals and then he was Governor again, appointed somebody who let him out of the hospital. This is what they think of, the man who buys fifteen alarm clocks if they are on sale, this sort of thing. They don't

think of any of the economic benefits. Whereas the old people, I think, think of the economic benefits.

J.B.: What economic benefits do they tend to associate more with Earl?

Begnaud: Well, he increased most of the things that Huey did. This is really what it amounts to.

J.B.: More roads, more bridges.

Begnaud: More roads, more bridges, higher welfare payments, and as far as the blacks are concerned, Earl is the man who brought the salary of white and black teachers up to the same level for the same degree. Before Earl came along,, a white teacher would be able to make, I don't know, say \$200, but a black teacher may be making \$150. Earl equalized it. So for the educated blacks, the ones who were teaching, this meant a lot. To the other blacks, the welfare, those who needed it . . .

W.D.: When you look back to say 1948, after the various administrations, are any of those outstanding? How would you describe some of those administrations?

Begnaud: Well, Jones was in when, from '40 to '44, and then '44 to '48 when Jimmy Davis was in, it was a caretaker administration because Jones wanted to come back. [Interruption] . . . And then Earl has four years of, buccaneering liberalism almost is what it amounts to, somebody called it that. Then in '52, they go back to sort of reform the administration.

J.B.: Do you think the people in this area associate reform government because of the type of government provided by Jones and Jimmy Davis first term and then Kenin as basically just conservative, pull the line caretaking.

Begnaud: It is business type government. There are no types and spent sort of things. It is run on a business-like basis. After four years of this, or eight years, you can go back to the election returns . . . now the Governor of the state, Lesch, went to the penitentiary. When Jones won in '40, the Long candidate, I forget who the Long candidate was, got 40% of the vote or something. This was after one of the Long people, the Governor had been sent to the penitentiary. His name was Lesch. So he had that support. Then you get eight years of Jones' people, you have enough, you get the Longs' and people have had enough, you get four years of conservative business-like government with Kenin and Earl Long comes back in '56 and wins in the first primary. Then in '60, Jimmie Davis, but when Earl dies I think the whole Long thing is really dead. McKeithan learned his politics under Earl too. He was a state legislator. Russell is about the only remaining one. Gillis is in the Congress and Russell is in the Senate. But the old Long thing is gone, and I think a large part of the reason is because the federal government has taken over the Long programs. Medicare, you don't need charity hospitals that much with Medicare if you are old. So when they come in with national health insurance, that is going

to wipe out our charity hospitals really. The federal rolls are taking over. Education, the federal money that is being poured into education, or was. So the federal government took over the Long programs and therefore, you don't need them any more. And those who are growing up now, don't remember. They don't relate, I guess, is the word they use.

J.B.: I am asking you this question as a historian. Do you think that Huey Long's programs in Louisiana and his advocacy of them during his time in the senate resulted in spurring the New Deal onto many of its social programs?

Begnaud: I think it helped Huey, and Thompson and some of the others. It helped to spur them to move further. Now how much, I really don't know, but I do think it did. This is one place I think I disagree with T. Harry. I don't really think that Huey was as important in the U. S. Senate as T. Harry has it. But I do think that his programs did have something to make Roosevelt move. It would have been fun if Huey had not been assassinated, because Huey would have made a heck of a lot of people uncomfortable. Now again this is something. You see, I really am a product of this state because I would have voted for Huey for Governor, but I don't think I would have voted for Huey for President. This seems to be the trend of this state also. They would elect Democratic Governors, we always do, but they voted for

Barry Goldwater when he ran for President. They voted for George Wallace, which was the race issue I guess.

J.B.: Did Nixon get elected because of the race issue? Was the heavy vote for Nixon because he was perceived as not really being that much different from George Wallace on race?

Begnaud: This last time?

J.B.: Yes.

Begnaud: I don't think so. I think Nixon got elected because of George McGovern. But again, getting back to your local politics, the third congressional district . . .
[Interruption] So this area did go for Lyndon Johnson in '64?

Begnaud: Yeah, the state went Goldwater. So there is something different, I think, about this area.

J.B.: Was the black vote to any extent responsible?

Begnaud: It was partially, but it is not big enough really to . . . I don't think it is big enough to really swing without some help, quite a bit of help. The academics would vote for Johnson, but there aren't enough of those either. You have got to have the man who drinks beer in the corner bar. So there is something distinctive about this area. When you talk about the South, I always exclude South Louisiana from the rest of the South, because I don't really think it is the same. I don't know if the South is

different from the rest of the country anymore, but I don't think that this part of the State of Louisiana is the same as the rest of the South. You've got a different make-up.

J.B.: As a historian, do you find it ironic that Russell Long, Huey Long's son, the man who wanted to share the wealth, led the opposition to the Family Assistance Program?

Begnaud: Russell was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and he has been that way ever since. But don't get Russell wrong, when it gets to Social Security, or Medicare or something, Russell still has votes that will vote for him no matter what else he does. My father is one of them. He is now on Social Security and Medicare. He spent seven weeks in the hospital not long ago, as a matter of fact he is in the hospital right now and Medicare picked up the bill. Every year, or every couple of six months there is a little hike in his Social Security check. And when a hike comes into Social Security, whether it is right or not, Russell Long gets the credit for the hike in the Social Security check in my old man's household. Yes, I think it is very ironic; I think really Russell ought to change his name to something else, he doesn't belong with the rest of the Longs. That is purely personal.

J.B.: Is there anything else we haven't covered that you would like to comment on?

Begnaud: I don't think so. A lot of this is just pure opinion. I hope you realize that. [Interruption] . . . The rest of them, whether or not they are convicted is another thing. I have become very cynical. If they go to trial and it is a politician, I figure he is guilty.

Marshall Brown, you know, the kick back on the insurance. Now this thing had been going on to a certain extent before, but Marshall Brown made a fortune on insurance. The man who was preferred gets the state insurance or else the guy who gets it kicks back some of the money, some of his commission to the state legislators, this sort of thing.

J.B.: Does this go back to what you said before, though, if you have a little bit it is not unacceptable but when you start making a fortune it is too much?

Begnaud: Yeah.

J.B.: So it is not the fact that he is getting a kick back, it is the size?

Begnaud: The size of him. Some kick backs are just pure wrong, but not that many of them. A little bit is fine, and when you crossed that line and the line is not really defined. There is a . . .

J.B.: So it is not a question of getting caught. It is a question of magnitude that makes it unacceptable.

Begnaud: I think so. The fight in Louisiana is

not between power groups, it is the ins and the outs. There is no reform movement, no great reform movement in this state because the outs want to get in. Some day it is going to be my turn. If the fights squash it now, then how in the hell am I going to get my cut. [Interruption]

J.B.: . . . Clerk of the Works.

Begnaud: Yeah, and he inspects to see that the contractor is doing his job. Well, once upon a time that was probably a good office. The Clerk of the Works for our administration building, Martin Hall, was a man by the name of Leroy, hell, I don't know. His nickname is Happy Fights. He is a guitar player. He played during McKeithan's campaigns. Happy Fight was the Clerk of the Works, no, that's right, one of the other buildings he was Clerk of the Works and the man knows nothing about construction. Now he is Clerk of the Works making \$600 some odd dollars a month. He comes in, looks at the thing, sees that they are pouring concrete or something, fills out his papers and sends them in. There is nothing in there doing what he is supposed to do. They guy they had for Martin Hall was a friend of mine who got his degree in elementary education. He used to come by to inspect his building and we'd go drink coffee. The local newspaper came out with this Clerk of the Works business and they had it on the front page. Here was a man who doesn't know anything about it who is getting six hundred and some odd dollars. A couple of people commented and that

was it. So I asked my kids in class when I had a Louisiana history class, "Now, here is the set up. The Governor is your friend. There is a state building going up. He calls you up and says I want you to be Clerk of the Works, and it'll pay you six or seven hundred dollars a month. All you have to do is go there and take a look around and fill out the forms and send them in. How many of you would reject it?" I usually get two or three and most of them are nuns saying they would reject it. Everyone else would accept it.

J.B.: Two or three out of how many in a class?

Begnaud: One hundred and twenty. It's free, you just don't do anything except go. one of the local newspapers called up one of the people and asked what the qualifications and they said you had to know how to get there and get back. This was published in a local paper.

[Interruption]

J.B.: Is there more corruption in Louisiana than other states, or is it only more talked about?

W.D.: And more tolerated?

Begnaud: I think it is more open. I really don't think that there is more corruption in Louisiana than say there is in New Jersey or some of the other states.

J.B.: How about in the other southern states?

Begnaud: There may be more in Louisiana than some of the other southern states because I think there is more toleration for it and there is more opportunity and there

may be more money. It is easier to come by. In another state the money in the state treasury will come from your property taxes and what have you. In Louisiana the property tax is almost non-existent because of the home state exemption. I've got a home that is just a modest little home. I built it eight or ten years ago for \$22,000 - \$23,000. I don't pay any property tax on it. The severance tax is on. There is a sales tax on. But it is a different kind of thing. Now, if I were paying that property tax, and this is where the shell came in, this is what they used to pay the shell that lives in my driveway, and everybody else's driveway, or dig the ditches, then it may be a different story.

[Interruption]

W.D.: The only tax that really hurts would be sales. Even the income tax is not that great. So the revenue is principally from oil?

✓ Begnaud: Oil. Severance tax.

W.D.: Which is somebody else's.

Begnaud: Somebody else's.

W.D.: So the fact that it is tax money isn't perceived by the public as being "my money."

Begnaud:

W.D.: Yeah. Psychologically, that makes a lot of sense.

Begnaud: See that is it. My wife sees it as my money regardless of where it comes from.

W.D.: Is she from the North?

Begnaud: No, she is from New Orleans. She was born in New Orleans and lived in Texas, I think, most of her growing up and adult years. So she probably has a Texas type of . . .

I don't know how in Texas. [Interruption]

. . . Yeah, there is a lot of gambling in Louisiana. McKeithan said there is no gambling in Louisiana. Then McKeithan takes a trip to New York and talks to the editor of Life or somebody and comes back and says there is some gambling in Louisiana. Well to me that meant one thing, he is stupid because he doesn't know what is going on or else he is lying to us because he knew what was going on and he wouldn't tell us. Either way . . . it is like Nixon and Watergate, either he knew the damn thing was going on, or else, if he didn't know, then it is even more dangerous than if he did.

J.B.: Do you think Edwards would just have shrugged and said, "Sure, there is some gambling going on in Louisiana."

Begnaud: Yes, I think he would.

J.B.: And people wouldn't have gotten upset?

Begnaud: He'd say, "There is gambling going on in Louisiana, but it is a little poker game or hurrah game. There is no organized gambling going on in Louisiana. See, you can gamble as long as the house doesn't take a cut. That is the theory they operate on. We could sit here and gamble all day long as long as no one is taking a percentage of the pot. It is not against the law, and they aren't going to bother you.

[Interruption]

W.D.: There is no public service tradition?

Begnaud: You know, people in the legislature, they call that public service. Maybe it isn't, I don't know. Some of the prominent families in the area, if a man wants to get into politics, this guy's father was mayor or something, or state legislator, therefore the son will follow in the father's footsteps. The Moutons, Edgar Mouton is now a state senator, his father had some position in the city. Edgar sort of grew up with politics and his thing was "I am going into politics." It was sort of a family tradition. But the oblige part of it

[Interruption]

End interview with Al Begnaud.