

Jack Bass: Governor, you've been active in politics most of this period that we are studying. You served eighteen years in the Georgia house.

George Busbee: That's correct.

J.B.: Was that your first political office?

Busbee: Yes.

J.B.: Why did you run the first time?

Busbee: Well, I was president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce in Albany and there was a vacancy that came up and the young people in the town became involved politically and asked me to run and I did run and that was the first time that I ever considered running for political office.

J.B.: Why did you stay in?

Busbee: I enjoy it.

J.B.: What have been the major changes since you have been in Georgia politics?

Busbee: Well of course, the biggest change resulted from the abolishment of the county unit system that we had in Georgia and by the new apportionment decisions of the Supreme Court. I would say that was the most significant change that we've had. The next would be in voter registration, civil rights, black participation. I would say that those would be the biggest changes.

J.B.: Your primary victory, as I understand it, resulted in a large

part because you had very strong support among blacks.

Busbee: Well, of course there were three stages to the election. One was the primary, one was the runoff and one was the general election. In the initial primary, we had many candidates and black support was pretty well divided. Bert Lance, one of my opponents, had the black metropolitan vote in the Atlanta area. We were pretty well divided out in the state. I had it in Savannah and some of the cities, but overall, it was pretty well divided. In the runoff against Lester Maddox, I of course, received the black support.

J.B.: Didn't you actually receive a majority in that first primary, though?

Busbee: In regard to the black vote? I don't have any exact way of telling. I would guess that it was pretty well even considering the large number of black votes that you have in the Atlanta area that would go to him. Out in the state, I think that I got a higher percentage than he did.

J.B.: Was it split to some extent in Atlanta?

Busbee: Well, there was some split in the Atlanta area. We have someone else here, Duane, who could do that for you. You will have to talk to him.

J.B.: O.K.

Busbee: One of the significant turning points was in Savannah. All of the candidates met. They had a political action league down there in the blacks and that was touch and go, mainly between me and Lance. However, the other candidates were there and each received some votes, but it was almost a tie. I think that I prevailed by one or two votes out of fifty

or sixty votes.

J.B.: We were here last May, I think. Walter De Vries was with me. We attended a meeting where all the candidates appeared before the County Officials Association and we were interviewing a number of people at that time and it was hard to interview all twelve candidates for governor, but the impression that I got from talking around was that you had especially strong support among black legislators.

Busbee: I would say that I had a majority support of the black legislators, yes.

J.B.: How do you characterize the Democratic party in Georgia?

Busbee: Well, the Democratic party in Georgia is mostly . . . well, we have mostly had a one-party system in this state and there has been some movement in some areas . . . as far as state and local politics and the Republican party, I think that if you are looking at the state versus the national scene, those who usually vote nationally Republican are not the same people that vote in Democratic primaries. We don't have any party registration in this state.

J.B.: Do you perceive the Republican party at this time as being a threat in Georgia, or being viable, even?

Busbee: I think that they are stronger than they have ever been. I don't see any immediate chance of a Republican victory for governor, but I think that the chances are better than they have ever been.

J.B.: Well, this was about the weakest run that they have had in eight years.

Busbee: You mean in the race for governor?

J.B.: Right.

Busbee: Well, they had . . . what was the percentage of the vote? Thirty something percent, I think. I don't know how much of this was Lester Maddox people voting against George Busbee, who crossed over and voted Republican. There's no way of telling.

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

Busbee: I think that you are going to have to have a Democratic candidate that would be acceptable to the Georgia people in a primary, which we will have for the first time in Georgia this next time. That's going to have to be a person that can identify with the Georgia people and come down and really campaign in the primary.

J.B.: Have the details of that primary been set up yet?

Busbee: Well, you have a commission. As far as the timing of the election is concerned, we have not done this yet. I anticipate . . . I'm on the committee and I anticipate that this will be after the New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Florida primaries.

J.B.: How about the details? Will it be a statewide, representational, proportional vote, or will it be by Congressional districts and voting directly for delegates.

Busbee: Duane will have to give you that.

Unidentified: I will have to look up the bill on that.

Busbee: Let him brief you. I'm in an extreme push here and he'll give you all the details on that.

J.B.: How do you feel about your legislative program this year?

Busbee: Well, of course all my program was put together from the time that I was elected until the time of the legislature, including the

writing of a budget, which was most important. But, all of my programs passed the legislature, 95% of the budget passed this session of the legislature, so it was rather successful. There were a lot of new programs and the legislature went along with almost all of them.

J.B.: I heard that you had to give up too much to the speaker to get your kindergarten bill through.

Busbee: You are talking about a thirty-five million dollar property tax bill and there was no concession made in that, because I campaigned on the bill.

J.B.: In that version of it?

Busbee: I wrote the version that passed. Now, the version that they wrote did not pass and the one that I wrote is the one that passed.

J.B.: How significant has been the change in legislative power? Now, I'm referring to, as I understand it, before Lester Maddox became governor that there was considerably more power in the governor's office, particularly insofar as virtually choosing the speaker and so forth and that marked the beginning of the independence of the legislature.

Busbee: That's correct. The reason was that in our constitution, if no one received a majority vote, then the election was held by the legislature and in the past, if a person received the Democratic nomination, that was tantamount to being elected and he was elected before the house had organized and he was able to control the appointment of the speaker and the chairmen of the committees and he completely controlled the budget, the appropriations. They had continuous appropriations and he had complete charge of the appropriations process. This changed when Lester Maddox and Bo Callaway, neither were elected and it went to

the legislature. I was part of the committee to make the house independent and we now have a Democratic caucus, we vote by secret ballot for the officers in the house and this was the first independence that we ever had. We still have it in Georgia.

J.B.: How do you feel about it now that you are sitting here?

Busbee: Well, I passed that in my program, I passed my appropriations bill and I think that I had to sell it to the legislature and I had to make certain compromises with them that I would not have done twenty years ago and I think that it is good, it's helpful. I like it.

J.B.: Do you think that is a change of major significance in state government in Georgia?

Busbee: What, the independence of the legislature?

J.B.: Oh, yes.

Busbee: Yes.

J.B.: I presume that you think that is sort of a lasting thing.

Busbee: I think that it will be a lasting change. It should be. I think that under this concept, however, you can still have strong leadership in the executive branch of government, which I think I have had in the first year.

J.B.: Do you appoint all agency heads in the executive branch?

Busbee: No, we have certain constitutional officers that are elected and some are appointed. Even where you have constitutional boards, the governor has some influence, but we have about half of our department heads that are appointed by the governor and about half of them are elected by the people and are known as constitutional officers.

J.B.: How do you assess the reorganization program that Carter did in his administration?

Busbee: Well, I think that he bit the bullet pretty well. You had to have some reorganization of state government. All over the nation you had reorganization and it has not been extremely popular with the governor doing the reorganizing. I think that overall, reorganization was beneficial. However, it did leave some problems for me, mainly in the Department of Human resources where you have welfare and health and all services of this nature combined into a single department, vocational rehabilitation. This means that 22,000 to 50,000 state employees are in one department. I have had a lot of problems in this department, but the legislature at this session gave me a blank check to restructure it and to reorganize it any way that I want to. I think that I will be able to solve this and that will be the main problem that I have. The other area was in the Department of Community Development, which consolidated community services along with industry and trade. I am making a division in that. Other than those two areas, I am able to work out everything, I think. I mean, other than those areas, I don't have any real problems.

J.B.: I understand that you made some proposals concerning minority employment in state government.

Busbee: Well, we are going to completely change the merit system and we put the state patrol under the merit system. We are trying to hire minority groups.

J.B.: Are you under any EECO order on that?

Busbee: We have received a commissioner's order and interrogatories have been directed to the government to determine whether or not there is or has been discrimination and we are in the process of responding at

this time to that.

J.B.: How do you feel about the issue involved?

Busbee: Well, I campaigned openly and about the state that I think that all groups should be represented in the government and have an input, not just employees and secretaries and so forth, but in policy making boards and administrative positions.

J.B.: How about on your staff?

Busbee: I have black representation and of course, women.

J.B.: How many blacks do you have?

Busbee: Four, I think. I've made appointments and several of them have been black.

J.B.: Five years from now, what would you like to be able and look back to say that you accomplished as governor?

Busbee: I've outlined most of it in my State of the State. My first priority is education, primarily in the secondary and education field. I championed the cause of vocational education and we have a good vocational system. In higher education, I've had a great deal to do with it and made a lot of progress, but we have to go a long way in elementary schools and high schools in this state. That is my number one priority, improving the quality of education there. Secondly, I would like to economically develop this state, all areas of this state, not just urban areas. Thirdly, I would like to streamline the government somewhat and give the people their dollars' worth of government for each of the tax dollars that we spend, but I think that a lot of people have illusions of leadership. I can only serve four years, I can't succeed myself and I am not trying to bite off more than I can do. I think that if I can just outline these areas which I've just done and succeed in that, then I'll leave a mark that I want to leave.

J.B.: Is constitutional reform an issue in Georgia?

Busbee: Yes, we've had two constitutional commissions. The first was during the reapportionment period. A three judge court kept the people from voting on the proposed constitution, saying that it was drawn by a malapportioned legislature. The Supreme Court, after the general election where it was to be submitted, reversed the three judge court, but it was too late for it to be submitted to the people, so it was never voted on. So, when Lester Maddox was governor, his first administration, they had another commission and they came up with legislation for a new constitution but they never passed the legislation to be submitted to the people.

J.B.: Do you consider this a priority item?

Busbee: I am in favor of constitutional revision during my administration. I made a step last year by redrafting the Georgia constitution, which has over 400 amendments to it, trying to organize it into subject matter. We have a very disorganized constitution. By doing that, we could then amend an article at a time, such as education or home rule, or something like this. But the way that the constitution is now drawn, you have things like county government in three different articles of the constitution. Finance is in three different articles. I think that was the first step. Now, this will, I think, be voted on next year, but we are either going to have a convention or a commission. Most likely a commission.

J.B.: How do you perceive your role in the Democratic party?

Busbee: Of course, I am titular head of the party in Georgia. I have Marge Thurman, whose appointment I've recommended. She was elected to the position of chairperson and she has been active in Democratic

affairs through several governors. Even though I am head of the party, she is very active and does make policy decisions.

J.B.: Would you consider actively campaigning on behalf of a ticket?

Busbee: Oh yes, I would. Yes.

J.B.: I want to ask you this, but it will be almost irrelevant because the book will be published about the time that this comes out, but how do you think that Governor Carter would fare against Governor Wallace in Georgia?

Busbee: I think this will depend on how well he does in New Hampshire and the Wisconsin and Florida primaries. If he is a formidable candidate there and is recognized as a formidable candidate, I think he will do pretty good. If he is not recognized nationally, I don't think that he will.

J.B.: Will you be supporting him?

Busbee: I'm not committed to support anyone. As I said, I'm on the commission that is going to write the primary, the presidential preference primary date and I'm not taking any position on any candidate at this time. I'm not saying that I won't in the future. I'm not committed to anyone.

J.B.: Did you by chance see the article that Harold Raines wrote in the Washington Post about you?

Busbee: I sure did.

J.B.: What was your reaction to it?

Busbee: Well, I appreciated some members of the press writing letters of apology for a person in their profession. I have no other comment on it, but it was unlike any other article that has ever appeared

in a Georgia paper and a number of papers did not support me.

J.B.: Anything particularly that bothered you about it, that were inaccurate or unfaithful?

Busbee: It was just untrue.

J.B.: Any specific aspects?

Busbee: I don't know what prompted him to write the article. It was a very vicious article, it was not true and I don't know what prompted him to do it.

J.B.: Is there anything specific that you are referring to?

Busbee: The whole article. The whole article. I think that if I wanted to pick out any one thing, he outlined that I had made promises in the campaign that I was not keeping. He wrote the article at the very front of a session and by the end of the session, I had accomplished everything that I had outlined in my platform and had gone with every promise that I had made and every commitment that I had made. I think that he was premature in his article, for one thing, but I think that it was a very vicious and malicious article. I don't concur with it.

J.B.: Do I understand that your standpoint is that the whole thing was a distortion?

Busbee: Correct.

Unidentified: It was a declaration after thirteen days in office that he had not kept his campaign promises. After thirteen days in office. In effect, that's what it was. A little premature.

J.B.: What do you think that you have done as governor that you might not have done had you not had the legislative experience that you had?

Busbee: If I had not had the legislative experience that I had, I don't think that I would ever have succeeded in getting the program through the legislature the first year of my administration. Carter had a very difficult time with the legislature and with his program. Maddox had the same problem. I've had hard work, but I think my legislative experience helped pass the program.

J.B.: Do you think that because the legislature has achieved its greater independence that prior legislative experience for a governor is going to be more necessary for him to be effective?

Busbee: I think that it is certainly helpful, yes. Of course, Carter had some prior legislative experience, nothing like I had, but he had some. Four years, I believe. I think that it has helped, but I believe in an independent legislature. You have independent legislatures where they dominate the executive branch and I don't think that should exist, and I don't anticipate that it will during my administration, but I'm not trying to make the legislature into a rubber stamp.

J.B.: I've seen several assessments of the legislative session. One is that you've won and one is that the speaker won. I presume that you agree with the former.

Busbee: I think that we both won, I think that the people won. We had a great session and accomplished a lot.

J.B.: How do you assess the speaker?

Busbee: Well, I think that he is a capable person. I think that on most issues he agrees with me and the issues that he disagrees with me on, he speaks out and we have our differences and the legislature resolves them. I've worked with him in the past, he was Lester Maddox's

floor leader. We had differences then, but after that, during the independent legislature, I worked very closely with him for four years during the Carter administration. He is a man of his own and not beholden to me. I didn't appoint him, like many prior speakers. He is rather outspoken, but I have no real difficulties, as I see it, with the speaker. I had difficulties with the kindergarten program, which he opposed. I had difficulties putting the state patrol under the merit system, which he opposed, but I passed both of them.

J.B.: In having to alter the name of the kindergarten program, do you consider that to be substantive at all?

Busbee: Well, I wouldn't say it was substantive, no, but it was a compromise.

J.B.: Would you consider it more of a face-saving device for him?

Busbee: Well, I would just say that it is an area of compromise. He was opposed to "kindergarten." Of course, another compromise was that I didn't get all the money that I asked for, I only got eighty percent of it.

J.B.: Where do you see state government heading? You've been involved in it a long time and probably have given a lot more thought to this question than most state governors who have been in office longer than you have.

Busbee: Well, I think that the role of the state is increasing. I think that it is very evident now that people have lost faith in government more at the national level than at any other level. But as you see the president and others in national government dealing more with state governments, the role of the state is going to increase. The

federal programs are designed more toward state involvement. I think that it will be stronger state government as a total movement.

J.B.: Where do you see this state moving? Was any major consumer legislation passed this year?

Busbee: Yes, the first that we've ever had in Georgia.

J.B.: This was your little FTC?

Busbee: Right. We created a Fair Trade Practices Act in Georgia.

J.B.: Do you see land use planning becoming a major issue in Georgia?

Busbee: Well, as far as land use planning is proposed by Congress, whereby you have land use planning at the state level for all the states and regionally, it will never come about in my opinion in Georgia. I'm very much in favor of land use planning, but I think that it should be done by local governments, except for critical areas. We do have some critical areas, the seashore and things like this where you have to have vital area protection. Basically, I believe in local governments having land use classifications and zoning laws.

J.B.: Where do you see the South heading politically?

Busbee: I think that the South politically, the power is going to increase. I think that this is going to be evident in this next presidential election, where it has been ignored in the past. I think that also their power is going to increase because of their economical development in the South. This is the economical growth area of the nation and this is going to be reflected politically.

J.B.: What has been the real impact of blacks participating in the political process to the extent that they now do?

Busbee: Well, we have more and more of them. When I first came to the legislature, we didn't have any black legislators, we had very few black voters in this state. Now, there is no discrimination. I don't know of any discrimination suit that we have had in years in this state. I think that everyone running for public office now recognizes this is a group that can't be ignored in a political election, so they are involved. They have become more involved by voting strength.

J.B.: I think that you voted against the seating of Julian Bond that first time. How do you feel now about that vote?

Busbee: Well, I would have made the same vote and I've frequently discussed it, as I did then. The vote of the legislature was overturned by the court, but there was quite a difference in the feeling of the people as far as draft dodgers and burying of draft cards and some of the things that he advocated at that time. Of course, now Vietnam is not popular and not that it was popular at that time, but patriotism was very high. I think that I would vote the same way now that I did then, in that atmosphere.

J.B. Were there any significant changes this year in the legislature in terms of coalitions?

Busbee: Yes, in the senate, that was the main change we had. The house was pretty well the same that it has been, but in the last four years, the senate has been divided between the two factions, one was the Maddox faction and one was the Carter faction. That was the governor's faction and the lieutenant governor's faction. This is completely gone now. I had the complete support of the senate, no factions now, it is just individuals. That is the biggest change we've had. We've had a lieutenant governor that has worked very closely with the governor.

J.B.: Is the house more factionalized than it was?

Busbee: I would think that the younger representatives, we had some sixty-odd new representatives at this time and I think that they asserted themselves more than they ever have in the past.

J.B.: Duane said that you had some other appointments and I don't want to

Busbee: Well, my problem, Jack, is that I've got to catch a plane out of here in a few minutes and I've hated that we've had to rush, I wanted to sit down and talk with you at length. The other problem that I had, is that . . . turn that off, if you will, and let Duane fill you in.

J.B.: Is there anything else that you particularly wanted to comment on that we didn't cover?

Busbee: No, I think that one of the big changes as far as the South is concerned, is in the economic field and I think that is where our strength is going to come from. When I first came to the legislature, for many years we were trying to lure industry from the North and that was the way we had economic growth and now everything we do is international. So, we are very much internationally involved here and this puts us on a working relationship with the state department, the president.

J.B.: How evenly balanced is the rural versus urban split in Georgia?

Busbee: I should have mentioned this awhile ago. You asked about major changes and I mentioned the county unit system. This split is almost non-existent. You used to have caucuses of urban people and the rural people. We don't have this anymore. We have

J.B.: That was fairly recent, too, wasn't it?

Busbee: Yes. This has been up until the last four or five years and

it has disappeared completely in the last two, three or four years. You have rural legislators that now vote for MARTA, World Congress and things like that in the Atlanta area. You don't see this anymore. It was quite evident when I first came to the legislature, urban versus rural.

J.B.: I do want to ask you one last question and that was about Governor Sanders' role in working with the problems of the city of Atlanta, in bringing you into it.

Busbee: He, along with some of the business leaders in Atlanta, Mayor Jackson and some of his people, have met with me and pointed out some of the problems and I agreed to meet with them later and asked them to meet in the meantime about some of the problems that they have and I intend to do that.

J.B.: How did the legislature respond to Atlanta's problems?

Busbee: I would say pretty good. I mentioned MARTA and the Congress and things like this. I think they respond very readily. They did not respond as far as the greater hospital, which is a charity hospital, because we have the same problem from every urban area in Georgia, but overall, they responded.

J.B.: Is there any reluctance at all on the sales tax, motels?

Busbee: This would be in an area that identifies with what I was saying, this won't help anybody but the large urban areas and the rural legislators went along with the bill and they have done this in several instances. Same thing with the local option income tax.

J.B.: How was that sold to them politically? Why should they go along with something that will help Atlanta and not do them any good.

Busbee: There is a very strong feeling throughout the state that this

is the capital city and the way that Atlanta grows is the way that Georgia is going and if we can make this an Empire in the South, we will all benefit by it. We have a great interest among all legislators in trying to get the various consular offices in Atlanta. They are very much interested in Atlanta.

J.B.: When V.O. Key wrote his book, I think that he subtitled Georgia "The Rule of the Rustics," and if you were to subtitle a chapter in a book on Georgia today, what would you say is sort of the dominant theme in Georgia politics?

Busbee: I don't know, I think that it is progress. As you can see by the last election, people have just changed, they are interested in education, they are interested in the quality of life for all the people in this state and they want to move forward and they want to be a part of the nation and I just think that progress is the theme.

J.B.: Well Governor, thank you very much.

(End of interview)