

Interview with Charles Sullivan, former lieutenant governor of Mississippi, Clarksdale, Mississippi, April 2, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and ~~Walter de Vries~~, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: I wonder if you would first just summarize your own political career.

Charles Sullivan: It's been rather limited. At the local level here in the city of Clarksdale, I was the municipal judge. And then from the period of 1955 through January 1960--a four year term--I was a assistant attorney for the eleventh judicial district, comprised of four counties in this delta cotton farming area. I then, in 1959, sought election to the governor's office. Not successfully. Again in 1963. In 1967 I was elected lieutenant governor, serving 1968 through 1972. In the 1971 election for the governorship I was again unsuccessful. That has been the extent of it.

J.B.: What prompted you to run for governor the first time, from being pretty much a political unknown in Mississippi?

Sullivan: For a long time, probably from after graduation from high school, I had thought that public life was a meritorious one, good. An opportunity if you wanted to do something perhaps worth while, at least to make a contribution. I had thought that I would follow the traditional steps, like municipal officer, district officer, then perhaps the state legislature or some other office. It seemed to me that there was an opportune time in the political environment of 1959 for an unknown individual to successfully seek that office. As a matter of fact, we missed the first primary by some 15,000 votes. I think the

general consensus was at that time if I had been in the second I would undoubtedly have been successful.

J.B.: If you had to characterize the state of Mississippi politics at the moment, how would you do it?

Sullivan: In a state of flux. A great deal of indecision. Continuing state of divisiveness and to some extent of groping. It's difficult not to identify blocs of identifiable voters having equally identifiable leadership. There are, of course, two national offices, Senator Eastland and Senator John Stennis, who have a very strong following in the state. And there are other individuals. But the Democratic party as such is badly splintered. The Republican party having, except in national elections, been relatively unsuccessful. A state of uncertainty, succinctly.

J.B.: The general view we've gotten in Mississippi is if someone discussed the single greatest change since 1948 it would be the emergence of the black vote in so far as politics in Mississippi is concerned.

Sullivan: Undoubtedly.

J.B.: In your own campaign for governor, with Charles Evers running as a third party or independent. . . . His advice to blacks in that run off was to boycott it. In the primary election, second primary. What do you think would have been the political effect if he had advised blacks either to support the best candidate, as they saw it, or to support either of the two candidates?

Sullivan: I don't think it would have made any difference. I think as a matter of fact they did participate, very actively. And I

do not think his admonition had any significant bearing at all. I must confess that I also think it was a public admonition and that privately that was not the case. This may be a very subjective conclusion on my part.

J.B.: [From Bass's research of] fifteen or so counties with 50 percent or more black registration, I think only three of them had more than 50 percent participation. In the majority of those counties, you got a majority of the vote. But that's inconclusive of anything.

Sullivan: Again, my conclusion is to some extent objective. So far as we could determine of black people who participated in politics-- not necessarily those identified as, not particularly in last years. The last decade black leaders such as Aaron Henry, Evers and others. But leadership at a lower level. It appeared to me they participated just as freely as they had done prior to that time.

J.B.: Did you analyze the vote and come to any conclusion as to how it split?

Sullivan: Race-wise? Not particularly. We did to some extent and we felt that in important areas, like Hines county, that it went rather predominantly for Mr. Waller. And you see, one county like that would offset several of the fifteen which you mentioned a few minutes ago. We thought in the more densely populated areas that it went rather strongly for Mr. Waller. That was by an overlay of precinct over the county map. And again, that was our own analysis and by no means scientific or precise.

J.B.: Do you feel that the conflict between the regular Democrats

and the loyalists will be resolved before the '76 convention?

Sullivan: No I do not.

J.B.: Do you feel it will be resolved after that convention or sometime?

Sullivan: That's an extremely difficult problem to realistically appraise. I have felt, with very strong misgiving for years, that we would ultimately drift to two parties racially. That is, a black party and a white party regardless of the label that it may have. I think this will be extremely unfortunate if it did occur. In time, it's entirely possible that the Democratic party will again become cohesive including black and white. And as a matter of fact, to a lesser extent, blacks will participate in the Republican party. More than they have done now since, oh, many, many years ago when the Republican party was predominantly black. I do not think that will happen in the next two or three years. But over a period of time I think the opportunity does exist.

J.B.: So you think it's unlikely it will end up in two parties, one basically black and one basically white?

Sullivan: Well, I'm more hopeful about it now than I would have been two years ago and I cannot cite any specific that has changed my thinking. It may be that the noise lessened after the last Democratic convention and I'm just not as aware of the friction that existed. It may still be there, as a matter of fact. I do think that a number of white and black people, scattered throughout the state, would like to see a party--say the Democratic party, or political party--which would not align simply on ethnic polarization. I think there are

a number of those.

J.B.: If you had been elected governor, how much priority would that have been in your mind--to resolve that split?

Sullivan: I would have been hopeful that it could have been resolved. I had a problem that perhaps confronts, or has at least confronted other people in politics in our state when it comes to the national level. My sympathies have been, in the past, with the Republican candidates. And that created a very difficult, personal situation for me. I felt that if I had been governor, having participated in the effort to do so as a Democrat in the state Democratic party, I would have had an obligation which I would have attempted to discharge to create a working relationship so that we could have gone to the convention as a group--black and white--representing Mississippi Democrats. There was some hope that that could be done. I think the manner in which the quota and other requirements were superimposed in the last Democratic convention would perhaps have thwarted it regardless of the effort. It was resented not only here. It was resented nation-wide. women. Whatever your particular criticism may have been. It was an effect here, of course. Very strong.

J.B.: Do you have any plans to return to political candidacy?

Sullivan: I don't answer no. ~~As I tell people who come, it seems to be~~ . We're approaching an election in 1975.

I simply do not know. I have avoided, deliberately so, encouraging people about the state, friends, participants in other campaigns, from getting into discussions about whether I should or should not participate

again in politics, particularly a gubernatorial campaign. I would think that I have said whatever I could say to the people of this state, having made the effort three times. And I doubt that I should tax them with having to listen a fourth time.

J.B.: I presume you're getting calls from both Republicans and Democrats.

Sullivan: Yes, yes I am. And the tempo begins to pick up now. When you move anywhere about the state or make a talk--which I have curtailed dramatically for the last two and a half years--inevitably that's the question you're asked.

J.B.: Do you have an answer in your own mind at this point?

Sullivan: No I do not. I was entirely honest. These people, many of them, are very, very close to me.

J.B.: I mean an answer in your own mind not only whether or not you would run but if you ran what as.

Sullivan: I did not know that either. Under the present situation that probably would be as I've done in the past. But I declare I don't know. I'm not sure that's a fair approach to the campaign. As I indicated a while ago, in '71 in the gubernatorial election, I ran under the Democratic machine, ran in its primaries, and yet my sympathies were not with the Democratic party in the presidential election. Of course a lot of things have happened since then.

J.B.: What effect do you think Watergate is going to have on the development of the Republican party in this state?

Sullivan: I think it has been damaging to it. While I do not

believe it will destroy the party, particularly not its hard-core faithful, it will make, I believe, a significant difference to them for several years--the immediate future at least. I think it will make it more difficult for them to field candidates for Congressional offices, particularly. It will have some influence, adversely, on state elections.

J.B.: In addition to that, would it also deter people from switching?

Sullivan: Yes, yes I do think so.

J.B.: Overall, at a minimum, a slowing down effect.

Sullivan: Yes, as a matter of fact switching had gained some momentum in this area, which I think has slowed perceptably.

J.B.: Is the old delta vs hills competition more or less dead or is it still pretty much alive?

Sullivan: Dormant to a large extent. Occasionally it becomes a problem, but not very frequently. To the extent that it existed say in the 'thirties and 'forties and even into the 'fifties, no it is not. Occasionally crops up. You will not hear it directly in legislative debate, but the undertone suggestion is there. But not to any extent as it has been in the past.

J.B.: Considering the institutional power that rests in the legislature in Mississippi, what would a governor have to do to effectively govern? And by that I mean simply to effectively get across his programs?

Sullivan: Have a personal rapport with individual membership so strong that he could influence very, very strongly, the implementation

of the programs that he considered important. an extremely weak governor--I do not mean the incumbent, the office rather is extremely weak and continues to be weak. The legislature continues to create boards, commissions, agencies which are, in the first place, duplicative and wasteful, and secondly, providing that much of the membership will come out of the legislature. Which I think is very, very unfortunate. It continues to dilute the executive branch and I think also to some extent it corrupts--and I do not mean that in the immoral sense or unethical sense--the responsibility and rule of the individual legislator. If he occupies executive positions in agencies, boards and commissions, then he funds, as a legislator, those agencies, boards and commissions and he describes their prerogatives and its authority. Again, not in an ethical sense, it is corruptive to the legislative process and most unfortunate. It continues, however, to be first noticeable in its continuing erosion of gubernatorial influence. At the present, as we're now situated, personal rapport, strong, strong personal leadership. One of the--and this perhaps is not invited and not pertinent--things that I regretted in the unsuccessful campaign in '71. I had developed a very close working relationship with the legislature and with the heads of most of the agencies that I thought would give a governor one opportunity to start on the basis of mutual respect.

~~friendship that would have~~

And it happens occasionally. I felt it could happen in that situation. That's probably outside this interview.

J.B.: No, that's fine. Nothing's outside the interview. To what

do you attribute your loss in that race?

Sullivan: Several things. One, I ran a very poor campaign. There was no freshness to it. I had a great deal of the governor's--former--appearances, held his speaking engagements, as well as my own. I had been before the state constantly for four years and even prior to that time. On every conceivable occasion. And if I had been a voter, why would I go listen to Charlie Sullivan talk? For one thing, and that spilled over into the campaign. There was not an enthusiasm and a freshness about it, I thought. I thought that the administration of Gov. Williams terminated, as is rather traditional, with the incumbent being a very unpopular political figure. I could have disassociated myself from him during the administration by doing so very deliberately and very publicly. Which I thought would have been disastrous. It would have destroyed any effort he had in his administration if the lieutenant governor, in the interest of a future campaign, had taken that course of action. So I was, necessarily, a part of his and that had a very strong effect. I think at that time there was a very strong feeling in the state here--in fact in the southern area and perhaps nation-wide--which I think is now strengthened by Watergate and related instances of seeking public people to place in public office who have not been "politicians." And of course I had become a figure related to politics over these years since 1959. I thought that played a role in it. There are other contributing factors. I would think those are the major ones.

J.B.: How significant was the fact that Sen. Eastland supported

your opponent?

Sullivan: Extremely significant. Not necessarily in the number of votes that were directly swayed by the knowledge. I admitted that Senator Eastland was supporting Mr. Waller. But the fact that the machinery and the finances and the confidence about that campaign came from or through that source or was motivated by that source.

J.B.: What are the sources of money that he can tap for a political campaign for candidates he backs?

Sullivan: I would not attempt to catalogue or identify specific sources. But a man who has been an incumbent in the United States Senate since the mid-1940's. And by simply making known his wishes in a political campaign. Create a very substantially favorable money situation for that candidate. It does not have to be done by a Senator calling x, y, z and saying contribute so many dollars to such a campaign. And I suspect it's not ever done in that manner. But the fact that that's the way he wants the election to be decided is productive of cash, very much so.

J.B.: If you had that campaign to run over again, what do you think you would do to create that freshness that you were talking about? Could it be done or was it just the situation you were caught in?

Sullivan: Some of it could have been done, yes. I could have taken a more vigorous attitude about many of the things that were said in the campaign. The advertising for Mr. Waller was done very, very well and it was the identification of myself with those important people, rich people, influential people in the state capital. I could

have handled that, rather than just let it ride by. I mentioned it one time at the end of the campaign. And a lot of the other things that were done. I could have been a more vigorous, tough, hard-nosed politician. Or campaign I had always done in the past. I could have, perhaps, been a lot stronger on specifics of the next four years. I perhaps took the position that people knew me so well and knew my attitude about everything--not everything, but what you would be concerned with. I could have already done some things like I did. For example, both of us were asked at different times on educational television what attitude we had about blacks on the highway patrol. Mr. Waller ducked that question and I said absolutely, they will be there and they will be in other positions of governmental responsibility. I took a strong position on the maintenance of public education, although I had been basically responsible for the creation, here in Clarksville, of a private school. Had been the chairman of the board for years. Many people resented that strong support of public education, thinking that it was an attack on private elementary and secondary education. Some of the things like that could have been done differently. Precisely, I do not know what I could have done.

J.B.: In your political and legal judgment, do you think the open primary law will be implemented in Mississippi?

Sullivan: I would not now be surprised that it is. Now how long it will survive is another question.

J.B.: Is it going to have to be tested first in the US Supreme Court before it gets implemented?

Sullivan: Quite likely, because it no doubt will be presented to the district court again and from there no doubt will go to the United States Supreme Court.

J.B.: If upheld by the Supreme Court, you said you don't know how long it would last. Does that mean how long the legislature would stick with it? You think they may be less happy with it. . . .

Sullivan: That's correct. I'm not sure that the people will be happy with that type of election over a period of time.

J.B.: How do you characterize the administration of John Bell Williams?

Sullivan: I think by hindsight it will come to be considered a good administration. I think he did some things. Well, in education I felt it was very strong. ~~appropriations~~. A lot of attention to it. A very determined effort to improve the highway system. And partially successful. In other areas, I thought overall, his administration accomplished a great deal. There were some suggestions from time to time, as there is in any administration, of dishonesty. I personally believe that he was absolutely honest. In my four years of observations. I left with that impression. I thought at times, in his public communication. . . created animosity for him when actually the man was trying to do things worthwhile. That was a problem I felt existed over the whole period.

J.B.: Was this on social issues primarily?

Sullivan: Yeah. I think the pronouncements so frequently *all* what the man was trying to do. And again, that's a personal opinion just based on being down the

hall for four years.

J.B.: What do you think he was trying to do in that area?

Sullivan: I think he's still a very staunch segregationist but had come to recognize, less than many others, that times had in fact changed and that the state was going to change whether he resisted or not. He was, as I just said, though still very strongly about that question.

J.B.: How do you assess the role of the R&D Center? In shaping the future development of the state.

Sullivan: I think overall it has been good. It continues to become involved, unwittingly perhaps, politically. And it is a point of controversy, whatever administration. If it could be in some way to some extent insulated from that--entire isolation is not possible and not desirable--protected might be a better word, from too much interference, I think it has had and would continue to have a healthy influence and make a major contribution. ~~I do not believe that the existence of the R&D Center will appear, as politicians sometimes like to say~~ . But I think it makes a contribution, and a very significant contribution.

J.B.: How do you characterize the present state of race relations in this state and where do you see them heading?

Sullivan: I think it's good, and by that I speak comparatively, of necessity. ~~irresponsible, real tragedy~~ ~~and then changes into a~~ ~~real--as I said a moment ago--a confrontation~~ . I believe it will improve. I think most of us in this state want everybody

to economically progress. For everybody to have better homes. Not necessarily bigger cars anymore, but cars. A decent opportunity. And I think that extends to the black community. In fact, if that is not achieved by the black community the future of the state is and I think a lot of Mississippians are coming to realize that.

J.B.: It is popularly believed in Mississippi among politicians that Senator Eastland opposed you because in some way you said something that he felt slighted him. That would be a way of putting it, because I'm not sure exactly what it is. Do you think that's the case or that something more than that?

Sullivan: I don't actually know. ~~—tangible,~~
~~real incident that that could ever happen.~~ I think ~~I~~ the Kennedy-Johnson campaign when I was an independent elective, to which he objected. But that was just a difference of our approach. I did not support the Kennedy election or the Johnson election. I was an independent elector in the state.

J.B.: That was the independents for Harry Byrd slate?

Sullivan: Yes. I do think he objected to that, but in so far as it forming the basis of any continuing, over the years animosity, I would be surprised.

J.B.: If the conflict between the loyalists and the regulars is resolved or when it's resolved--presuming that sometime it's going to be resolved--what sort of coalition do you see forming in the future Democratic party in this state?

Sullivan: I don't know. It would change very considerably. For one thing, let's assume Senator Eastland does not run again. That plays

a role in what that coalition would be. It's difficult for me to give you a real answer to that.

J.B.: If Senator Eastland does not run again, is that going to create a political power vacuum in the state?

Sullivan: To some extent.

J.B.: Is his successor, who ever that is, likely to fill that role?

Sullivan: Not with the power that Senator Eastland has, no. Not for a period of time. Much of that strength, as I believe it to exist with Senator Eastland, is in the county government organizations or positions, such as the board of supervisors justice of the peace. And to some extent these organizations or the individuals who occupy them do not have the influence over an election that they did years ago. And that is changing as time goes by and continues to do so. I think that's one source of his very strong influence, and it is strong.

J.B.: Then you think power is likely to become more diffused?

Sullivan: Yes it will.

J.B.: How important, in your judgment, for the political well-being of the state is constitutional revision?

Sullivan: I don't think it's critical. I think that many of the things that need to be done can be done without that. The experience of most states, recently, has been that--I'm not certain that they had a better constitution when they finished. The tendency now is, as I observe it, is to attempt to have the constitution all-inclusive, to cover all of the problems, *to cover* ~~and~~

all the years ahead and to cover all of them. Which I think is absolutely impossible. Many of the constitutions--at least it seems to be--that have been written in recent years have tended to do that.

J.B.: Do you see any chance at all of the executive getting more power in this state, becoming stronger institutionally?

Sullivan: Only over a period of time and if you have a succession of individual governors who are able to have a real strong leadership with the legislature. As a matter of fact, if this were offered as a constitutional change now, it would fail, in my opinion.

J.B.: Fail because of the legislature or because of the--

Sullivan: Even if you could get the legislature to offer it, which is the easiest way to get an amendment before the people--let's call it an amendment--I don't think the people understand, at present. And now we're in an environment or an atmosphere of being afraid of the chief executive. And I don't think it would pass today in Mississippi.

J.B.: How viable do you consider the Republican party at this time? How much of a threat do you consider them in a state-wide election? Say in '75, if they run a full slate of able candidates, let us say.

Sullivan: I think they would elect some people to various offices. I would look at it now and be surprised that they would elect

J.B.: Do you anticipate there will be more blacks and more Republicans in the legislature in the coming years?

Sullivan: Yes and I think the Republicans *will gain*

more in '76 than it might now due to the problem we were discussing, the national problems affecting the party.

J.B.: Can you foresee any gains for the Republicans in the immediate future in the Congressional delegation?

Sullivan: No, I do not. *We don't oust incumbents*
~~ousted an incumbent~~. We haven't done that in a long time. I don't say that's good or bad. Our people have been taught, rather indoctrinated, rather thoroughly with Congressional seniority. And there's only been one who lost an election in a long, long time in this state.

J.B.: Tied in with that, in your political *judgments*, in 1972, if the White House had given Gil Carmichael the same sort of support he gave to *other* Congressional Republican candidates. Strong endorsements really of support, financial and otherwise, would it have made enough difference to *make* a Republican victory in that race?

Sullivan: In my opinion, yes. He got 47 percent didn't he?

J.B.: About 40.

Sullivan: Maybe a little over. About 41. I think it would have made a difference.

J.B.: Is there anything we haven't discussed that you wanted to comment on.

Sullivan: I don't think so.

J.B.: Do you think Waller got a majority of the black vote statewide in the second primary?

Sullivan: I think so. Again, that's a subjective conclusion but there was no way we could really tell. And in fact, we

did not try that hard to tell until the campaign was over.

J.B.: Precinct data is awfully hard to get in Mississippi, isn't it?

Sullivan: Yes, but it's available. Absolutely.

J.B.: Is it reported to the Secretary of State's office by precinct. Okay, I was not aware of that.

[End of interview.]